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ABBOTS VERNEY

R. MACAULAY



William W. Staake

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Book Fund

ABBOTS VERNEY

ABBOTS VERNEY

A NOVEL

BY R. MACAULAY

“

‘D’ anime vidi molte gregge

* * * *

E,‘parea posta lor diversa legge.’

DANTE

LONDON

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ABBOTS VERNEY

CHAPTER I

THE RUTHS

It would, no doubt, be generally admitted that a deviation from a type is an undesirable thing. It may be, on occasion, like rotten fruit in an apple-room, spreading its pernicious taint both before and behind it.

There was a deviation in the Ruth family after a good many generations of fairly close adherence to a type. It was not a good deviation, and the Ruths did their best to throw a veil over it. Those who knew the Ruths knew also that it was well in their presence to present a most impenetrable ignorance on the subject of the deviation.

The deviation took place when the family had been living for something over three centuries at Abbots Verney on the Fell. Abbots Verney is in Cumberland. As you gather from its name, it stands on the brow of a hill, facing the keen rush of winds that drive up from the Westmoreland and Cumberland fells, steadfast and indomitable commander of the long valley slopes, still keeping the grave paternal air derived from the days when it was dispenser of charity, hospitality, and religion to the people of many villages, and in

particular to the people of the hamlet called Verney, which straggles up the hill, long and grey, with the depending air of ivy clinging to a strong oak.

As to the Ruths, they have had, like other races, their characteristics; perhaps more than other races, they have been inclined to adhere to a type, treading firmly in each other's footsteps. Their motto, *Priores sequor*, has had for them a meaning natural and inevitable. Their type has been clear cut—a type of which gallant gentlemen and brave soldiers are made, who take honour and courage for their gods, and walk very straight and boldly through life, without looking much to the right side or to the left. This singleness of eye is often found in certain strong and simple natures, who will deal in no subtleties either of the conscience or of the brain. The Ruths were not a markedly clever race; they were not apt, for the most part, to 'see through a stone wall.' Often, indeed, they saw very little but what was directly in the path in front of them; but this they saw very clearly indeed, and were usually pretty sure that they saw it correctly to every detail.

Undeviating singleness of purpose and an uncompromisingly strong moral sense, when not tempered by any striking breadth or complexity of intellect, are apt to crystallize as obstinacy. The Ruths were very obstinate people from the beginning to the end, though indeed the end is not yet.

The Colonel Ruth who was born in 1820 was an admirable example of the family type. Nature had endowed him generously at once with its merits and its limitations; life, possibly, had stereotyped the latter and a little warped the

former. It had left him, at the time I take up the story of the Ruths, a most punctiliously neat man of somewhere about sixty-five, straight-featured and keen-faced, with uncompromising lips and blue soldier's eyes. Any sorrow that might have seared him in the past—and he might have been divined one of those who take their sorrows hard—seemed but to have added an erectness to his carriage and a more challenging keenness to his eyes. Though his hair and short-cut moustache were iron-grey, he hardly looked his years; he walked alertly, wore, as a rule, neat puttees and brown boots, and swung a military cane, and looked at the world through a youthful-looking eyeglass. He had nevertheless four grandsons, who all lived with him. His two sons had both married young, but his second son the earlier of the two, so that the three descendants of the cadet branch were all older than the son of the elder line.

The father of the three elder boys was a sailor, pursuing a steady, honourable and inconspicuous career abroad—a Ruth of the Ruths. His wife, in search of climate and excitement rather than particularly desirous of her husband's frequent company, stationed herself in foreign ports, visiting only at intervals her three sons at home, who, as she confessed frankly, bored her very much. 'All boys are bores,' she said, 'and mine are particularly stupid ones.'

The youngest boy had of his father and his mother memories that grew fainter year by year. But since he was a person of tenacious memory, they never grew so faint as to die quite away. It seemed to him in later years that they had only slumbered lightly, to be woken at a touch.

* * * * *

Going up the length of Ullswater you come to Patterdale, and thence to the Hagg, a great green space shut in by circling fells. There the Cumberland and Westmoreland people come from miles round to see the sheep-dog trials, standing in a huge half-ring, many deep, through the day. Female quality watch from their carriages behind; male quality stand grouped with field-glasses by the rope; shepherds with long, fair, canny faces and shrewd upper lips, shout very loud, and find more to say possibly than in all the rest of the year put together. Small boys duck in and out, and crush themselves against the rope, and imitate, in simple-hearted admiration, the shepherds' broad and raucous cries; as young Verney Ruth, 'Coom tha back, tha baad laad! Dang the dog!' He spoke with feeling, bent forward, hands on wide-apart knees, brows frowning, for, while laying tenpence on his favourite, he had hedged with fivepence on the dog in question, his acute judgment having esteemed him second on the list, and there he was, having driven his sheep safely through the gate and up the fellside, and straight as an arrow through the stakes, blundering at the turn, and letting his quarry fly in scattered wildness straight over the hills to the right. His master whistled shrill blasts, alternately short and prolonged.

'Beastly hard luck for Dickson,' said Verney Ruth, who was a friend of Dickson's, straightening himself and his creased brow, now that there was no more hope for Dickson's dog.

'And I had sevenpence on him, hang it all,' remarked Charlie Ruth, with a valiant emulation of the lordly public-school carelessness of his eldest brother Roger.

'Well,' his young cousin said ponderingly,

'there's still Symes's Jock to come. I never really thought Dickson's was a first-classer, you know. I've got tenpence on Symes's Jock, with Mr. Pattinson. Roger tried to make me have it on Carpenter's Molly with him, but I wasn't such a fool. Dickson told me all about Molly the other day. So I said to Mr. Pattinson——'

'There's George Drew,' broke in Charlie, interrupting the long-winded arrogance of his cousin's story. 'Look at his dog; isn't it a beast?'

'No,' said Verney, who usually considered very carefully and then gave an opposite opinion. 'No. I think I rather like him. I'll have you on a penny, if you like, that he's in the first ten.'

'No,' Charlie said decidedly. He had an uneasy faith in Verney's shrewdness of discernment and luck in speculation.

Symes's Jock was next on the list. A man with field-glasses made his way towards the two small boys, a rather small and plump man, who might have been any age between twenty-five and thirty-eight. He wore very clean brown leggings and a brown bowler hat, and had a mild, round and youthfully ruddy countenance, and, in general, what might be described as a gentle sporting look. There was, perhaps, a touch of wholly unobtrusive pathos in his manner.

'So that is Symes' Jock,' he observed, levelling his glasses.

'Hadn't you seen him before, Mr. Pattinson?' inquired Verney Ruth, looking up at him.

'No,' said Mr. Pattinson, 'I hadn't had that pleasure.'

'But you had tenpence on against him.'

This method of betting was very far from Verney's own carefully-studied speculations.

'So I had, Ruth minimus. I hadn't forgotten,

you know. I'll pay up if necessary with a good face on it. Mr. Symes is a very energetic man, isn't he? He does such a lot with his arms. I wonder how much that helps Jock. I think it would confuse me, you know.'

'They're through the gate—hurrah, they're through the gate first go!' cried Verney shrilly, bent, hands on knees again. Then he clenched his tongue between his teeth and watched, breathless, occasionally giving vent to a hoarse 'Coom on, then; coom on!'

'I suppose if you said "come," Jock wouldn't understand,' speculated Archie Pattinson.

'They'll miss the stakes,' shrilled Charlie Ruth. 'They've missed——'

'No, they've not,' came in a triumphant roar from Verney. 'They're through. Get on, tha good laad!'

It was a straight course, swift and unswerving. At the turn the sheep showed their usual unreasoning hankering for a race across the open hill. Fate hung for a moment in the balance. Then Mr. Symes's Jock flung himself with quick presence of mind and determination in front of the leader, and the three swerved, and scuttled excitedly back along their course, and so through the gap into the field again.

'But you needn't look so conceited, Ruth minimus,' observed Pattinson; 'the penning may spoil all yet.'

Mr. Symes, permitted at this point to render personal assistance, ran forward with outspread arms, and hovered gesticulatingly about the pen. To get all three sheep in at once was no easy task. It was worse than one of those puzzles with three marbles. . . .

Verney Ruth turned purple in the face with

breathlessness as he watched. It was maddening the way one darted out as another was induced to rush in.

But Symes and Symes's Jock between them did the job at length.

'Good old Symes!' vociferated Verney, joining in the roar of appreciation. 'Good old Jock! How long d'you think they were, Mr. Pattinson? Much the quickest there's been, don't you think? And there's only four more. He's sure to win! I knew he was the best. I said so, didn't I, Charlie?'

'I'm afraid you betted on a cert, Ruth minimus,' Pattinson said, 'and I've lost tenpence. May I ask if you've anything on the trail race? Because if so, I think I'll put my money on the same.'

'I've not,' said Verney. 'I didn't really know much about the chances for the trail. You can't go by what people say.'

'Ah! you haven't the true betting spirit; you reduce it to a science.'

The morning slipped by, then the afternoon. People began to tire and depart.

Colonel Ruth, strolling round from the further end of the field, levelled his eyeglass over the scattered groups, seeking his grandsons. He hailed Archie Pattinson.

'Seen my boys, Pattinson?'

'Just now. I believe they all went to refresh themselves'—he indicated the ginger-beer stall near the entrance—'having won the where-withal.'

The Colonel drew up sharply.

'Eh, what? Won, d'you say?'

'Well, I don't know about the others,' said Pattinson ruefully, 'but Verney has rooked me of tenpence.'

'Verney?' The word came out like a pistol-shot. 'Betting?' The Colonel stood suddenly very straight, grasping tightly his field-glasses in one hand and his silver-topped cane in the other. Pattinson looked mildly taken aback.

'Verney bets?' repeated Colonel Ruth sharply.

'Well—he betted with me; I betted with him, you see. We had tenpence on.' Pattinson observed to himself that he seemed to have put his foot into it rather. He felt vaguely apologetic towards his friend Verney.

The Colonel was silent for a moment. Then—

'Would you mind, Pattinson, if I asked you to have your bets with someone else another time?'

'Oh, I'm sorry, really, you know,' the young man murmured uncomfortably. 'Ought to have thought of it, I daresay; but somehow it never occurred to me that it might have evil effects.'

'Oh, it's quite all right, of course.' The Colonel recovered himself a little. 'But he's a bit young to begin games of that sort; he's only ten, you know. What's that? Only tenpence? Oh, yes; I know, I know. No harm, to be sure. But it's a silly habit for boys to get into; waste their money and all that, don't you know. I don't mind for the other boys so much, but Verney's such a child. No, don't apologize, my dear fellow; I expect the boy forced it on you. Here they come.'

The Ruth boys came out of the refreshment tent in a state of impoverished repletion and deep content.

It was fortunate that the former was beyond destruction; the latter was abruptly shattered (as far as Verney was concerned) by a sharp, 'Verney, come here!'

Verney became suddenly and indefinitely on

the defensive. His shoulders grew a little squarer, his chin a shade more pronounced; he looked from under his brows apprehensively.

'Have you been betting, Verney?' The question rang sharply, with something of the thunder of the parade.

'Yes, I have.' The answer came with a rapidity born of nervousness. 'I had tenpence on Symes's Jock, and fivepence on Dickson's, to make sure, only he was nowhere near——'

'That'll do. I don't want the list, thank you. You won tenpence from Mr. Pattinson; give it him back at once.'

'Oh, come now, that'll hardly do,' murmured Pattinson; 'besides, he hasn't got it any more, don't you know.'

Verney thrust his hands into his pockets and felt about for a moment.

'I've spent it,' he remarked.

'Have you no money at all?'

Verney drew out his left hand and held out a halfpenny on his small extended palm.

'What did you mean to pay Mr. Pattinson with, suppose you had lost your bet?' The question came with a sonorous sternness, beneath which Pattinson quailed.

Verney grew a little squarer, and looked up from under his brows into his grandfather's face.

'There's my sixpence next week, and Humphrey owes me twopence-halfpenny. And Charlie said he'd like my catapult for threepence, only I said he couldn't have it.'

'Oh, very well. Pattinson, here's your money. Verney, I shall stop it out of your pocket-money. And don't bet again, d'you see? I won't have it.'

'I say, it was a fair bet, you know,' Pattinson put in, uneasily jingling the tenpence. 'I lost

fairly, and I don't see that I can take it back, you know. A bet is a bet.'

Then, under the sternness of the Colonel's eye, he hastily dropped the money into his pocket. The glance of those commanding blue eyes was certainly not easy to withstand. It always made Pattinson feel vaguely as if he were undergoing an orderly-room interview.

'I say, grandfather,' put in Roger Ruth uncomfortably, 'do you really mind? We all had something on, you know. We didn't think you'd mind.'

'All right, all right'—sternness had given place to testy impatience—'I can't settle all your debts for you. If we want to catch that steamer we must come at once. Good-bye, Pattinson.'

The four Ruth boys walked away together; Verney with his hands in his empty pockets, silent, gloomy, and aggrieved. Verney had, from a young age, a fine capacity for expressing gloom in his demeanour; it did not desert him in later life.

It would have been fairly easy to discern, looking at the four boys as they walked, which was not brother to the rest. The three elder boys had a certain resemblance: Roger, a fifteen-year-old edition of his large sailor father; Humphrey, broad, wholesome, and ruddy-faced; Charlie, slight and fair and handsome, looking as if Verney, a year his junior, could have knocked him down with one hand—all with the blue, honest Ruth eyes. Verney was less regular-featured; he was a squarely-built person, with an uncompromising chin, dark, deep-set eyes, and a singularly pleasing smile, that came and went rather abruptly.

The boys were hailed as they passed by an

elderly lady in a carriage. She and Archie Pattinson, who was her nephew, drove home together afterwards.

'I've been putting my foot into it, Aunt Betty,' he remarked placidly.

'You have? Well, what now?'

'I did an abominable thing—I betted tenpence with Verney Ruth against Symes's Jock. It was foolish of me, because Verney knows so much more about these things than I do, and he was a very good dog; but it was worse—it was corrupting of the young. So I took back the tenpence, and Verney took a fine rowing standing. Oh, I took a rowing, too, but not standing—grovelling. I always grovel when Colonel Ruth fixes me with his stern eye.'

'H'm! I thought Verney looked atrociously sulky about something.'

'But is laying tenpence on a dog such very wild dissipation, Aunt Betty?'

'My dear Archie, it's the beginning of the broad road that leadeth to destruction.'

'Oh, come, Aunt Betty; Ruth's not that sort, you know. He's a fine good fellow, is old Ruth.'

'Dear Francis, I am sure he would be flattered to hear you call him so. But of course he is; did I hint otherwise?'

'He didn't mind the others betting either,' cogitated Archie Pattinson, who appeared to take a somewhat unusual interest in human nature. 'It was only the little one. Too young, do you think, perhaps?'

'Oh, Verney!' Miss Betty Prendergast paused a moment. Then, 'Yes,' she assented, with a hint of dryness perceptible 'too young, perhaps. Also you mustn't forget that Verney is the heir, and mustn't grow up to squander his substance.'

After some interval she added: 'Francis is very much a Ruth, certainly. And the most shining merit of the Ruths is not acuteness of perception—never was, I believe. Dear souls, they nearly all occasionally run their heads up against walls that aren't there. Such a pity, when there are so many walls really in the way, which of course they run their heads against too. Now, when sensible folk come to a wall, they turn aside and walk round it; you, Archie, stand and look at it in your tranquil way; but the Ruths must needs go at it like a battering-ram, and break their heads. And of course, when there isn't any wall at all, it's more foolish than ever.'

'Only in that case they can't well break their heads.'

'Can't they? Their hearts then, at all events.'

'Ah!' he sighed slightly and smiled. 'Hearts are more easily broken than heads, to be sure. More easily mended too, I dare say,' he added, with gentle optimism.

'Don't maunder, Archibald,' she said unkindly. 'Amuse me now till we get home.'

CHAPTER II

VERNEY RUTH'S FRIENDS

WHEN Colonel Ruth told his youngest grandson, then not quite thirteen, that he did not intend to send him to a public school, Verney grew slowly red all over his face, pinched his fingers rather hard together in his pockets, and said nothing.

It was reserved for Charlie, who was going to Eton in the autumn, to comment on the news, which Verney told him with some shortness.

'But why not? Didn't you ask him?'

'No.'

Charlie cogitated.

'Does he think you'll get into rows or something?' he hazarded.

'Dunno. S'pose so. He's always thinking I get into rows at Spurgeon's. Don't know why he should. I don't; not more than most people. Don't know why he's always getting so sick with me.' Verney spoke with a bitterness very unusual under his pretence of carelessness. He did not intend that Charlie or anyone else should divine what this decision of his grandfather's meant to him. Charlie, however, did divine it. It also meant a good deal to him, for going to Eton without Verney appeared to him a very poor idea. Verney could have gone fairly placidly without Charlie, but then that was a different question.

Desire for Verney gave Charlie an unusual boldness that evening. He sought the Colonel in the billiard-room, where he was practising the same stroke over and over again with true Ruth pertinacity.

The Colonel looked up as Charlie came in. It struck him, as it sometimes did, that this third grandson of his was certainly a very nice-looking little chap. He was exceedingly fond of Charlie, and the two did not know each other in the least, and probably never would.

Charlie leaned against the billiard-table and watched the stroke with interest. The Colonel explained the theory of it to him, as the practice rather failed to explain itself. Then Charlie tried to do it, and restored his grandfather's complacency thereby.

'You'll never make a player, Charles.'

'Verney's better, really,' said Charlie, who would not have admitted as much at any other time, but now thought to play the diplomatist.

'Verney, hey? Straighter eye, has he? Yes, yes; I think he has. Verney 'll make a player, I'll be bound.'

Charlie brightened up a little. Verney was obviously not in disgrace.

'I say, grandfather—'

'Hey?' The Colonel was squinting along the cue. 'What, boy?'

Charlie flushed and stammered a little. He was a nervous boy, and rather afraid of his grandfather.

'I say, about Verney, grandfather.'

'Hey?'

The interrogation came sharply now. Charlie took his courage in both hands.

'Why isn't he to go to Eton, grandfather?'

He flinched a little as Colonel Ruth laid down the cue and looked at him rather hard beneath bent brows.

'Verney? He told you to ask, did he?'

'No, he didn't; he didn't tell me. But he's jolly sick and I'm jolly sick, too, and I thought perhaps you'd let him, if——'

'If you interceded for him, eh? No, no, Charlie; it can't be done that way. You mustn't interfere with what you can't understand. I've settled it. Verney will have a tutor at home.'

'But why, grandfather?'—Charlie pressed his subject with a most unusual persistence of courage—'why Verney more than Roger and Humphrey and me?'

His grandfather looked at him with a touch of grim surprise; he was not used to pertinacity from Charlie. Finding it, he resolved to treat the boy fairly as he would have treated an older person.

'A public school, Charlie,' he began, with a touch of hesitation, fidgeting with the cue, 'is a venture, you know.' Charlie listened for more to follow, wondering uneasily if he had let himself in for a 'pi-jaw.' 'It has a good many opportunities,' continued Colonel Ruth, 'and a good many temptations and dangers. You'll find out that for yourself soon, my dear boy.' (Yes, it was obviously going to be a 'pi-jaw,' and it showed alarming symptoms of becoming personal.) 'A big school like Eton,' continued the Colonel, 'is hardly the place to send a boy to, unless you're pretty sure that he's a stable sort of fellow, you know.'

'Stable?' Charlie's brows queried.

'Unless you're pretty sure,' amended the Colonel, 'that he's the sort of boy who'll keep

straight and not get himself into messes, and who'll make a good thing out of his school-life. You understand me, Charlie ?

Yes, Charlie understood.

'But—but Verney——'

The Colonel moved suddenly.

'Verney is not quite the sort,' he said abruptly.

Charlie looked genuinely puzzled.

'Why?' he said. 'Verney doesn't get into any more rows than anyone else ; no more than I do.'

The Colonel smiled slightly. He liked generosity, and he liked the boy's boldness in speaking out.

Charlie's boldness grew.

'Why are you so often sick with Verney?' he stammered. 'Why do you keep licking him for things like you do—things heaps of chaps do all the time, I mean? You're always licking him, grandfather, and coming down on him, and——'

He faltered under the grave eyes.

'My dear boy,' the Colonel said quietly, 'I think you are talking of things you know very little about. I punish Verney, as I punish all of you, when he deserves it. If even you have seen that he deserves it more often than the rest of you, you will more easily see why it would be undesirable to send him to Eton.'

'But—but'—there was a world of unuttered argument in Charlie's mind, but under those stern eyes he brought none of it forth, only concluding weakly—'a tutor! How beastly!' Then he added, as a final appeal, 'And he's captain of the footer at Spurgeon's!'

'That's enough, Charlie,' said Colonel Ruth, and all his grandsons knew well the conclusive note when he sounded it; 'I've explained my

decision to you, and I'll explain it to Verney if he chooses to ask me about it. I don't intend to alter it, so the less said the better. I'm sorry if you are disappointed, and I'm sorry if Verney is, though he said nothing about that to me. Now you had better go away, my boy.'

For signs of his youngest grandson's disappointment Colonel Ruth looked in vain. When next he came across Verney, he was playing chess with Charlie (who hated chess, and had been coerced). The Colonel looked sharply at the small square face, with its dark, knitted brows. It bore no traces of emotion.

Verney played chess with the earnestness of a zealot. He was a clever player too, for so young a person. Charlie, who was not clever, afforded poor sport, but would do at a pass. Roger and Humphrey always resolutely refused to play. Verney usually played with his friend Miss Prendergast, who was likewise a devotee, or with her nephew Archie Pattinson. Verney had learned that it was one of the occupations on which his grandfather did not smile. Another of these was drawing; Verney had a very pretty talent with his pencil, and used it with effect for purposes of ridicule. A man who himself could draw had once seen some of these productions, and had prophesied that the pencil would not always be confined to caricature. The boy's grandfather, to whom he had made the observation, had not seemed so much pleased as the speaker had expected.

It had once come round to Colonel Ruth's ears that his grandson had been getting into trouble for portraying his master during a Greek lesson. Verney still wriggled uncomfortably when he

remembered the interview that had followed this revelation.

The headmaster of the preparatory school to which the Ruth boys went was a young man, vigorous and addicted to enthusiasms. The chief of these was for intellect in all its forms. Like other enthusiasms, it possibly made him a little narrow and sweeping in his judgments. Hearing from the youngest Ruth that he was not going to be sent to Eton, with a considerable effort of self-restraint, he bottled up his emotions at the moment, and decided mentally that this was a case of flagrant stupidity and must be seen to. Hence an interview, a few days later, between him and Colonel Ruth.

The Colonel very courteously received his visitor in his library, and offered him a cigar; his acquaintance with him was of the slightest, but he believed him to be a young man of sense and intelligence. Douglas Spurgeon, who feared nothing, and whose bump of veneration was not markedly developed, did not stand in the least awe of the stern-lipped, keen-eyed soldier, who kept most people at a distance. He plunged straight into his subject, hot with it.

The Colonel listened in grave silence. He already knew that Verney was not considered by his school authorities to be lacking in intellect. Spurgeon said, perhaps, rather more than he should have said as to the relative calibres of the brains of Verney and of his three cousins.

‘Not stupid, the elder lads, hey?’ said their grandfather sharply. Without any great interest in scholarship he had yet a military respect for capability.

‘Not in the least,’ Spurgeon said calmly. ‘But—if you’ll excuse an honest opinion—not clever

either. I don't know about your eldest grandson of course, he was before my time'—he cast a comprehensive mental glance at the big, pleasant-faced lad who was going up for Sandhurst in the summer—'but the other two—Humphrey and Charlie, (isn't it?)—have quite sound work-a-day brains. No good their trying to do too much with them; but they'll probably carry them well enough through anything that has to be done. Charlie's precious idle, of course, but I dare say that'll mend. But Verney——'

'Yes; Verney?'

'Well, Verney has his wits about him,' concluded Spurgeon, with a short laugh.

A momentary gleam of pride shot into Colonel Ruth's blue eyes. He stroked his chin meditatively.

'And on the strength of that you want me to send him up for a scholarship?'

'I do, most undoubtedly.'

Colonel Ruth was silent for full two minutes. The younger man wondered what he was thinking about. When he next spoke it was tentatively, a trifle hesitatingly, even.

'He's—he's not a specially steady boy, of course——'

Spurgeon's brows rose. It struck him as the veriest side-issue.

'Steady? Well, I don't know about that, Colonel Ruth; not many small boys are, I suppose. Verney's a bit rowdy—not more than most of them though, I should say. Oh no, Verney's a good little chap; nothing much wrong with him. Sound footballer too, if that's anything to you. He'd make his mark at Eton.'

The Colonel moved restlessly in his chair. It seemed to him that he was being persuaded un-

fairly and against his better judgment. He proceeded, in the disturbance of his mind, to say what seemed to Spurgeon a very strange thing.

'Now, I sometimes see in the boy's reports that he's top of his form in this or that——'

'Yes, and he could be more often than he is,' Spurgeon interpolated.

'Well,' the Colonel reddened slowly, looking the other straight in the face; he cleared his throat and spoke abruptly, 'I suppose it's all right, is it?'

'All right?' Spurgeon repeated it, at sea.

'All fair, you know, and above board,' the Colonel explained sharply. The proud flush mounted to his forehead, his eyes were angrily fierce.

Spurgeon stared at him, then laughed shortly.

'You mean, does the boy cheat?' No, he does not. He's no need, I assure you.'

It was characteristic of Spurgeon, this answer. The moral side to him was obscured. He attached small importance to it, but having a certain shrewdness in discernment of character, he flung the results of it—an impatient, half-contemptuous gift—to those who cared for it, but could not see for themselves.

His method of expression was perhaps unfortunate.

The Colonel supposed that Spurgeon saw the question in a mainly utilitarian light.

'His wits save him, do they?' he reflected.

Spurgeon wondered for a moment what manner of man this soldier was. His bearing did not give the impression of a man who was wont to harbour small suspicions.

With an inward shrug he reverted with tenacious purpose to his point.

The Colonel felt that he and his guest had points of resemblance to two parallel lines. He broke into the fresh dissertation abruptly.

'You see, Mr. Spurgeon, you and I don't look at the question from quite the same point of view, which is natural, no doubt. You think only of wits. I don't, you see. That's where we differ, I'm afraid.'

The younger man reflected a moment.

'I'm not sure that that's quite fair,' he said quickly. 'You'd be more right in saying that I *speak* only of wits. For the obvious reason that it would be pure impertinence on my part to speak of anything else to you. I speak of what it's my business to speak of. All the other considerations—the boy's welfare, the good of public-school life for nearly every boy, and all the rest of it—are emphatically *not* my business, but yours.'

The Colonel was silent, thoughtfully staring into the fire. Whosoever the business, it seemed a singularly complex one.

Spurgeon rose to go.

'I hope you don't think this cool on my part,' he said, 'but I've the credit of my school to keep up, you see, and your grandson will do his part in keeping it up if he gets half a chance. It's all in the way of business, you will observe,' he concluded, with a frank smile, to which the Colonel slightly responded as he shook hands.

With a deft finger on the pulse of the old soldier's pride, Spurgeon, reader of men, made it thrill a little beneath his touch.

But after all the last word on the subject was Miss Betty Prendergast's. She and Colonel Ruth were very old friends; she knew, possibly, more of him than anyone else knew. She had

known, too, his sons, and now his grandsons, and in especial Verney—perhaps through the chess-playing.

The Colonel had a respect for his friend's judgment. The Ruths were not apt, even momentarily, to look at any question through other eyes than their own; yet Miss Prendergast's emphatic, 'I'm sure of it,' in reply to his dubious, 'You really think that?' was not without its effect.

Shading his eyes beneath his hand, he watched Verney that evening, as, pencil in hand, he schemed out with knitted brows the field for the next day's football match. Verney was a careful and a discerning captain. Charlie, who was not in the team, and privately thought Verney might have put him there, nevertheless, being an obliging person, tendered his assistance, of which Verney did not take very much notice.

'Fletcher's best on the left, don't you think,' Charlie suggested.

Verney grunted.

'Fletcher's precious little good anywhere.' He pored for a moment over the paper, then looked up abruptly. 'I've a jolly good mind to have Fletcher out.'

'Who'd you have instead?' There was a well-suppressed gleam of hope in Charlie's eyes.

Verney meditated.

'Might have Outram major . . . or might have Cudworth . . . or might have you. Well, look here, suppose you try it.'

'Right,' Charlie assented carelessly.

'Dare say you'll be chucked out before next time,' Verney said, brooding thoughtfully over the paper.

Colonel Ruth rose.

'Done your business, Verney ?'

'Yes, I think it's done, grandfather.'

'Well, suppose you come to the library for a little. I want to speak to you.'

Verney put his paper into his pocket and got up, wondering uneasily what on earth he had been doing now. He could not remember anything, but he supposed his grandfather had been holding intercourse with his school authorities. His school doings seemed always somehow to acquire a lurid wickedness in the transmission, when they filtered through to his grandfather's ears.

But no accusations or sharp questions came when the two sat facing each other in the uncomfortable, leather-backed chairs.

There was a touch of fidgety hesitation in the Colonel's manner as he spoke, drumming his fingers on the arm of his chair.

'You remember, Verney, that I said I had decided not to send you to Eton.'

Verney nodded sombrely. It was not likely that he should have forgotten.

'Well'—the Colonel cleared his throat and paused a moment—'I have altered my mind. I am going to send you, anyhow for a while.'

Verney flushed to his forehead.

'I shall see how you get on,' said the Colonel gruffly, 'I shall put you on trial, Verney. You shall—you shall have a fair chance. Take it, my boy, and show me how well you can use it. I shall watch you ; don't think I shan't notice. Remember that it'll be your business not to let the credit of our name sink. It's a good name, you know.' He fixed the boy almost fiercely with his eye.

Verney muttered some assent. Embarrassment, gratitude, resentment, strove in him together.

'I suppose they tell you,' went on the Colonel, 'that you can do your work—pass examinations and the rest of it. But don't go and think that's the important thing in life; it's not. I wouldn't give a snap of my fingers for it, unless it went with the things that really matter. And what's the thing that really matters, boy?' The fierce regard deepened.

Verney grunted, twisting the button on his sleeve uneasily.

'Honour,' the Colonel proceeded, with sudden emphasis; 'that's the chief thing for all of us. Never forget that.'

His voice sank to an undertone, tremulously forcible; his knuckles were white with the grip of his fingers on the arm of the chair. A dark flush had mounted to his forehead—the painful, uneven flush of strong feeling and age.

Some feeling strove in Verney for utterance, and presently found it, though he could not put it as he would.

'I say, grandfather—I suppose—I mean, I hope I shall get on all right at Eton, you know, and I won't get into rows more than I can help—and I don't really think I do, more than other fellows, you know; but everyone's bound to get into rows sometimes, you see, and I suppose I shall, too, and—and are you going to mind awfully when I do?'

It was said stammeringly, with a curious mixture of shyness, pride, resentment, and a kind of honest frankness that rather appealed to the soldier's taste.

The Colonel answered him with slow punc-

tiliousness : 'I'm quite aware, Verney, that boys must get into scrapes sometimes. As to whether I mind—well, that depends on the manner of scrape it is. Roger and Humphrey at Eton have never done anything which has made me seriously uneasy ; if you follow their example, you'll be all right.'

Perhaps Verney reflected that it had not always been 'all right' when he had followed his cousins' example ; perhaps also he wondered, with a touch of resentment, what were the more dangerous pitfalls that his grandfather apparently saw across his own path. He thought the interview was at an end, when he was suddenly startled by an abrupt, almost rough, 'Don't disgrace yourself and all of us, Verney. I won't have it ; d'you hear me ? I will not have it !' The words were emphasized by quick blows on the leather chair-arm. 'Remember, you're to have the place, and—and I won't have it !'

The child flinched involuntarily before the restrained violence of the tone ; it had for him old associations, and he wondered for a moment if the thrashing was coming after all.

'I shan't do anything—I'm not going to,' he said, half sullenly, looking at his grandfather beneath down-drawn brows.

The Colonel looked at the nervous, resentful face in silence for a moment. It seemed to dawn upon him that it was only a boy's face after all—a child's face. It might have dawned upon him, had he had acuter perceptions, that that was not a good look to bring into a child's face without some very adequate reason. He sighed a little.

'That'll do, Verney ; you can go.'

'You've been a precious long time. What was the row ?' Charlie demanded.

Verney stood before the fire with his hands in his pockets, whistling between his teeth.

'Nothing much. I'm going to Eton all right, that's all.'

'Are you? What a lark! I say, Verney, that was me; I talked to him.'

'Did you?'

'I say, I'm jolly glad. Aren't you?'

'Course I am. What's the good of asking things like that?'

Verney was studying the arrangement of his team again with bent brows.

'I say, Charlie, for any sake do play up to-morrow, and don't footle. Do know whether you're to pass or take it on; that's what you always mess, you know; it's so beastly silly, that. I've half a mind to have Outram in instead.'

The boy's voice was perhaps a shade unsteady; his temper was unusually short, Charlie found.

'I shall go to bed,' he said presently, and went.

As for that which had changed Colonel Ruth's decision, each of the interceders on Verney's behalf thought success was due solely to their efforts. Charles Ruth glorified himself on that account. Spurgeon said, 'Thought I'd touched his pride up a bit by my eloquence,' well pleased with himself. Miss Prendergast smiled her little dry, wise smile, for it was she who had sounded the right note, touching the Colonel on a sensitive spot—his sense of justice—with, 'I think, Francis, it's only fair play to give the boy a chance.'

So the boy was given a chance, and Abbots Verney on the Fell took on a new quietude, and stood very silent in its grey, monastic peace through the greater part of each slow, windy year.

CHAPTER III

ARCHIE PATTINSON IS CHAGRINED

Six years later, Archie Pattinson, shortly after the youngest Ruth had gone up to Oxford, received a somewhat severe and unpleasant shock, and following on it found that his intercourse with the Ruth family, and more especially with his friend Verney, took on a new, and, as he recognised, almost inevitable constraint—a constraint of embarrassment on both sides, and an almost vicious sullenness (temporarily) on one. Pattinson was inclined to think that he had been hardly used in the business; he had been dragged abruptly into the intimacy of a matter which concerned him not at all; with no warning note thunders had been launched, so to speak, over his quailing body, and there had been nowhere for him to flee. No veil of tactful delicacy was available; the thing was indecent in its nakedness.

Pattinson owned to his aunt that he had thought better things of Colonel Ruth.

‘It’s wrong of Francis,’ she said, kindling, ‘but very wrong indeed. If I had been there, I would have told him so. But I wasn’t there, and I can’t, because I’m not supposed to know. It would be pure impertinence in me to know, and Francis resents impertinence. You shouldn’t have told me, Archie. Now I’m chagrined to no purpose.’

'So am I,' he said, 'and I feel it has given me a shifty eye.' I can't look Verney in the face, don't you know, without blushing; it's so awkward, that. I wish the Oxford term began earlier. Talk of chagrin, I never before saw so much chagrin collected together in one room. What with the Colonel's chagrin, and Verney's chagrin, and Roger and Humphrey and Charlie, who of course were chagrined too, and me, who I expect was the most truly and acutely chagrined of all—oh, it was all a most chagrining business, I assure you. Used Colonel Ruth to be a most extraordinarily stupid young man, Aunt Betty? Or is it just cussed perversity?

'Stupid young man?' she sighed. 'Oh, aggressively so, in some ways. Stupid, obstinate, honest to the finger-tips—that's a Ruth, and that's my friend Francis. But what am I doing, letting you talk of your betters like this? It isn't fitting; at all events the Ruths don't babble, and they don't loaf. Go away, Archibald, I'm tired of you, and I want to read a novel. The people in it are very nearly as silly as people in real life; they couldn't be sillier, anyhow.'

The incident which had so acutely chagrined Archie Pattinson had taken place the night before. Pattinson had dined with the Ruths, who were all at home together, Roger on leave from Aldershot, Humphrey reading for orders, Charlie and Verney from Oxford. Dinner at Abbots Verney was regarded by most people as a rather pleasant affair; there was, as Miss Prendergast sometimes remarked, a pleasing bachelor air about the establishment; 'and then,' she added, 'those five male creatures are really distinctly attaching; Francis, the courteous host *par excellence*; Roger, with his handkerchief up his sleeve, getting so nicely

tanned and looking so very straight in front of him—such a lot of him too, dear youth; Humphrey, nice and broad and deliciously transparent (oh, figuratively so, of course!), with a laugh that would infect a cow; Charlie—really that boy grows a picture, such a graceful way of offering one sugar too, only I wonder how long it will take them all to learn that I don't take it. No, I don't in the least suppose Francis lets them have tea when they're by themselves, poor boys. And Verney—well, Verney can talk. Yes, it's a charming *ménage*, only so uncomfortable sometimes.'

Last night had distinctly been one of the times. Dinner itself was innocuous; the Colonel was fiercely eloquent on the subject of lead-mines and the poisoning of his streams; Pattinson babbled gently on, as was his wont, like a cheerful little brook; Verney ruthlessly wrested the conversation from him, and took it himself whenever he thought it was his turn; the other three, less conversationally inclined, contented themselves perforce with briefer utterances.

Afterwards they played bridge. Colonel Ruth and Verney won, persistently, small sums from Pattinson and Roger. Roger's play was not markedly strategical. Pattinson, as a bridge-player, was as serenely inconsequent as in any other capacity. Verney was, in fact, the only member of the party who could, without straining of words, have been called a good player. He himself was well aware of the fact, and did not take any particular pains to conceal his knowledge of it, having a tendency to arrogance.

Then the astounding thing happened.

Verney having doubled no trumps, Pattinson laid out an exceedingly poor dummy, wondering ruefully what Roger would make of it.

Colonel Ruth paused a moment, then laid his cards face upwards on the table. They thought for a moment that he was ill, looking at his painfully compressed lips and slightly shaking hand.

‘You—you saw that,’ he said deliberately, looking across at Verney.

‘What?’ inquired Pattinson, at sea.

‘Your hand. Verney saw it before he doubled. I—I saw him look. I was sure of it at the time; dummy’s hand proves that he acted on his knowledge.’ His voice, low and forcibly restrained, shook as his hand was shaking.

Pattinson, shooting at Verney a sidelong, uneasy glance, saw that he had grown dark-red all over his face. Then he laughed, a short, abrupt, very mirthless laugh. But it was reserved for Roger to say, with honest eyes full of unmitigated astonishment and bewilderment: ‘Rotters.’

Across the table the blue eyes met the dark ones; it would not have been easy to say which were the angrier.

‘I ask you a plain question, Verney. Did you or did you not see Pattinson’s hand?’ demanded the low, bitter voice.

Verney threw his cards face upwards on the table and rose, pushing back his chair abruptly.

‘If it comes to asking that kind of question, it seems about time we stopped playing, doesn’t it?’ he said, and between the bitterness of the two tones there was not a point to choose, albeit the boy had striven to throw a cloak of carelessness over his.

Pattinson, blushing a little at the stress of the situation, shovelled together the scattered cards.

‘Well, look here, you know,’ he murmured feebly, ‘might as well get on, don’t you think? Have a fresh deal—what? All a mistake, don’t

you know,' he ended, with mild deprecation, explaining the matter for his own edification apparently, for no one else listened to him.

'Thanks, Pattinson. I think I'm inclined to agree with Verney, though, that it's about time we stopped playing—more than time in fact.' The Colonel spoke slowly, with his eyes on his grandson's face; 'I notice that you haven't yet denied the charge, Verney. Do you intend to, or do we leave it at that?'

The old man and the young faced each other for a moment in silence.

Verney grew slowly from red to pale. Before answering, he reached to the chimney-piece behind him for his match-box, and, with scrupulous deliberation, lighted a cigarette. Then—

'Leave it at that, by all means,' he said indistinctly, interested chiefly, apparently, in the cigarette between his teeth, 'as far as I'm concerned. Unless you've anything more to say.'

There was a dangerous stolidity about his politeness that matched the older man's white-hot calm. But that calm broke up suddenly.

'I *have* something more to say,' said the Colonel, and brought his fist down sharply on the table, so that the cards leaped, and Pattinson started. 'If you won't deny it, you shall apologize. Damn it, sir! do you think you can turn a thing like this aside with a word? If you choose to disgrace this house, I shall make it clear that you stand alone, and that the rest of the household have no part or lot in it. You shall apologize to all of us—you shall——'

Indignation overcame Pattinson's embarrassment.

'I say, you know, this is a bit strong, isn't it, Colonel Ruth? I mean, of course, it's all mere

rotting, I suppose, isn't it? No one thinks for a moment—well, anything of the sort, you know. Of course not; I needn't have said that. Aren't we carrying a joke too far? No good doing that, is it?

'How sickening!' muttered Charlie in the background.

'I suppose you don't really seriously mean to accuse Verney of looking at Pattinson's cards, do you, grandfather?' said Roger, whose somewhat slow wits had taken time to reach this point, and now revolved round it in angry bewilderment.

'I do accuse Verney,' said the Colonel simply, 'and he does not deny it. Either a denial or an apology appears to me rather essential.'

'Oh, deny it and have done, then, Verney!' said Roger, with impatient contempt. 'If a denial's wanted, you may's well give it, I suppose, though I do call it rot, I must say.'

His tanned face was flushed and angry; he looked at Pattinson with embarrassment. Verney laughed shortly:

'Oh, if anyone wants a denial,' he said, 'there it is! Though what the point of a denial is to a person who thinks you've cheated, I can't say I see. Might just as well lie too, I should think. Is that all, or is there anything else anyone wants me to say? Quite happy to oblige, you know.'

The Colonel looked at him in the face with keen, painful eyes, in which anger and wistful doubt jostled each other. He looked at the moment a very old man. Then relief swept out other feelings. He turned to Pattinson with a curious kind of defiance.

'We take your word naturally,' he said to Verney, his eyes searching Pattinson's face with a kind of challenge the while.

'Do you really? Thanks so much.'

The ironic surprise was exaggerated. If Verney flattered himself he was concealing his hurt, he was mistaken. Everyone in the room but himself knew that he had never before in his life addressed his grandfather with that manner and tone. Pattinson knew it—knew, too, that beneath the careless stolidity he had studiously assumed, the boy was blind and sick with angry pain.

Pattinson had a curious impression that there was more to come when he was gone; that the demand for a denial, and its acceptance when it came, was for his benefit—a defence thrown up against the stranger within the gates. He surmised stern questionings and stolid answers to come, and thought he had better leave them to it before the hour grew later.

But they met his faint beginning of feeble excuse with defiantly determined hospitality. Verney, whose challenging mien said, 'Nothing has happened; think so at your peril,' suggested billiards, and they played, and Verney swore at the hockey on the ice, which, he said, had made his hand shake. Verney was flushed and rather flippant, and made a series of exceedingly poor jokes. His three cousins were undisguisedly sullen and aggrieved. Pattinson flowed gently on, and no one would have guessed from his manner and cheerful countenance that he was unhappy and embarrassed, and desirous to be at home. The Colonel was punctiliously courteous: a new stiffness had come into his manner, a new challenging keenness to the regard he turned on his guest, a new, proud defensiveness to his bearing. It was as if he had done what honour demanded of him, at a price that embittered his

very soul, filling it with angry soreness against the reluctant witness of the sacrifice.

'They'll have a cheerful evening, I should think,' reflected Pattinson, driving home.

And from his point of view the episode closed there, except that, as has been said, for the rest of that vacation there was a new, eye-shirking constraint between him and the Ruths.

Colonel Ruth, on the day before the Oxford term began, had an interview with his third grandson.

'Verney play cards much at Oxford?' he inquired gruffly.

'Oh, I don't know. Yes, I expect he does, grandfather. He's awfully keen, you know. Cards and chess—yes, I think he plays a good bit. I don't see him, though; I don't play much.'

'Working too hard, eh?' the Colonel suggested, with the grim, kindly smile that he bestowed on Charlie more often than on anyone else.

Charlie laughed frankly. He was accustomed to his school and university failures being regarded with a pleasing leniency. 'Look here, Charlie, you must pull up and do better than this,' was usually the most said to him, for all Verney's provoking habit of bringing their achievements into abrupt and emphatic contrast.

'Well, see here, Charlie, I don't think much of cards—or chess either, for that matter—as a way of passing the time. Deucedly unhealthy, you know.'

'Oh, he doesn't pass his time over them, you know. He played football hard all last term.'

'All right; out-of-doors is better than indoors, isn't it? Encourage Verney to be out a lot, will

you, Charlie? He only wastes his time and his money over cards.'

'All right, grandfather. He's sure to be out a lot this term, you know; he'll be training.'

'The river, eh? Good oar, is he?'

'Oh, fair. No great shakes, I don't think.'

'Now'—the Colonel ruminated, rubbing his close-shaven chin meditatively, 'are you two boys in much the same set—know the same lot of men, more or less, eh?'

'Oh, I don't know. No, I don't know that we do very much, really. Can't expect to if you're at different colleges, I suppose—different years, too.'

'Well, what about Verney's friends? Good sort on the whole, eh?'

'Oh, I think so, you know. I should think they're all right. One of them came here once—Beresford, do you remember?—when we were at Eton.'

'Yes, yes. Well, look here, Charlie, I want you to keep an eye on Verney a bit, see? You're a year the elder, remember that, and you've been up a year longer, and all that. Just be with him when you can; give him a look-up from time to time, you know.'

'Oh, all right, grandfather! We're together a good bit, you know. Verney doesn't want nursing, you know—not much.'

'And look here, Charles; you spent too much money last term, you know. You must cut it down a bit, you young spendthrift, see? I won't have extravagance. Bad for my pocket, and bad for your morals. I shall reduce your allowance, if you don't look out; no, you don't see the logic of that, do you? I dare say not; it hasn't got any.'

'I'll try and cut down a bit if you like,' Charlie was graciously pleased to promise.

Presumably obeying his instructions to 'keep an eye on' Verney, Charlie walked into his cousin's rooms on a damp, drizzling morning in the next term. Verney, surrounded by books, was adding final loving touches to a singularly faithful portrait pinned on to a drawing-board in front of him. Charlie bestrode the table.

'Decent, that. Pass it here. Oh, ripping! Gown hangs too straight, though; you should make it fly more. I say, Smith's would buy that from you, and stick it in the windows. I swear it's a long sight better than the one of him they had last week. Take it to them to see.'

'Too good for them,' Verney grunted.

'I say'—Charlie's attention roved—'you're fugging. I was told I wasn't to let you fug. Come out.'

'Oh, get out! I'm busy. Can't you see?'

'Well, you've finished old what-d-you-call-him, if that's all. Got anything on this afternoon?'

'River.'

'Well, lend me a sov., will you?'

'See you further first.'

'No, but I want it, really. I owe it to a man. Fork out, there's a good chap.'

Verney rummaged among the loose coin in his trouser pocket.

'You shall have it whatever it is,' he promised, and drew forth half-a-crown, which he rolled across the table.

'You Jew, you felt it,' Charlie said, serenely pocketing his gains. 'I suppose you thought it was a penny. Sold again. Come and have tea at Buol's this afternoon?'

'I don't tea these days, you know.'

'I forgot. Poor beggar! I say, Mods. in ten days; isn't it ghastly? I shall be ploughed for a cert.'

'Shouldn't wonder.'

'Well, it's not my fault. Think he'll cut up rough, I say?'

'Not he. He's used to it.'

'Well, I wish I'd done maths or something instead. I can't stand the silly old rot; it's so beastly uninteresting. Well, I'm off. You won't let me have another dip, I suppose? Stingy brute!'

Verney began to divest himself of his garments.

'Think I shall do a run along the towing-path before lunch. Care to come?'

'No, thanks. It's no fun trying to keep up with you when you run. Silly game, I call it; five miles in this muck. Oh, if you're going to make a mess like that, throwing your clothes about, I shall go.'

Charlie's gloomy prognostications proved to be justified. He was ploughed, and took the news when it came with an assumption of injured surprise. His grandfather did not take his failure to heart; he knew before that Charlie had 'no head for books.' Personally, he did not attach much importance to University successes; scholarship was out of his line. His own intellect, though sound, was neither subtle nor brilliant; nor did he esteem that a lad wanted much book-lore with which to begin his career. Some who go through life with mediocre abilities are inclined to attach an unduly preponderating importance to the possession of that which they have not; with Colonel Ruth it was not so. It might almost seem, to some minds, as if, either in the natural development of his character, or

twisted by some perverse freak of fortune, his moral sense had been tugged to such expansion that it lay broad-cast over all his other faculties, leaving no room for appreciation of anything besides an erect bearing and a straight onward path.

‘Fonder of play than work, eh?’ was what was said to Charlie. ‘Fine character your tutor gives of you, Charles. Says it’s not much good your staying up, if you can’t do better than that. In fact, they want me to keep you at home for the next term, and make you work. What do you say to that, sir?’

So through that summer Charlie kicked his heels at home, though to make him work was probably beyond the power of his grandfather or anyone else.

‘Awfully silly and tiresome of you, Charlie,’ said his mother, coming home to find her youngest son at leisure. ‘We’re all awfully ashamed of you, you know. If you can’t be clever, the least thing you can do is to be industrious.’

Verney, coming home in June, renewed memories of a large, massively stolid sailor, with direct blue eyes and a silent demeanour, who smoked an unceasing and strong pipe, and of a small, delicate woman, his wife, pale-faced, thin to emaciation, lines of faint acidity cut about her lips, eyes palely and yet vividly blue.

From the thin lips were wont to come utterances that did not belie the lines about them—a harmless amusement, for she had wisely chosen a husband with a skin fairly proof, and had borne him three sons after his own kind. It was sometimes her rage and her despair that her light flicks fell unheeded, or heeded only as an elephant might glance round puzzled if stung by a wasp.

Her motives—besides the amusement of the game, which would have been more considerable had she met with a greater success—were, presumably, rage and revolt against fate, which had induced her to marry a man of slower and blunter wits than her own, and had piled grievance on grievance by sending her sons like-minded with himself. Her own soul alone knew how she had longed for a clever son; to him she might have transferred all the tenderness and allegiance she had never bestowed on her husband; and if it seems curious that she was not blinded, at least in part, to facts, it must be remembered that that blindness is largely the result of the merciful years of custom, which blunt, happily for domesticity, the objective point of view. Mrs. Ruth had every opportunity of surveying her children from the outside. The result was a shrug and a faint sneer. What has been said of Colonel Ruth in her case may be reversed; it was her appreciation of intellect that had become an obsession, submerging all other standpoints—intellect, too, of a sort that reveals itself, its outer sign epigram and paradox, and a handling light yet acute. She had been born and bred in a nursery which sharpens wits, and attaches to learning a weight which seems to many societies extravagantly disproportionate. From London to the country is a wide step, yet a bridge may cross the chasm; between country and University there is a great gulf fixed, and no bridge will cross it, for on neither side will a bridge be sought. The seeking of bridges was far from Mrs. Ruth's mind. She was not devoid of natural affection, but it had been pinched in her to a curious jealousy, and showed itself in the perpetual discharge of small shafts.

It was an added irony that, looking up from a sublimely unconscious son, she should meet her nephew's eyes, watching her in quizzical amusement. The shafts sent against himself he caught—differing thereby from his cousins, who missed theirs—with a smile, but with his hand only, holding them for a moment to appreciate, then laying them politely aside with an adroit deftness that angered the sender. Indeed, the shafts directed against the serviceable armour of the others not unfrequently met with the same fate, being caught and turned en route by the only one among the spectators who saw them coming.

The large sailor looked at Verney ruminatively. He had never had much opportunity of making his nephew's acquaintance; he had seen very little of him since he was an Eton boy, always getting into hot water at home. Verney recalled one interview with a smile. Deputed by the Colonel, and incurious as to reasons, his uncle had stolidly thrashed him. Verney, who had not thought the thrashing particularly well deserved, had taken it with equal stolidity, and there had been no ill-feeling on either side.

Captain Ruth looked at his nephew with a slow, impartial scrutiny in his blue eyes, rather as if he were a dubious question, to be considered at leisure. Human nature, as he would have been the first to admit, was a subject rather out of his sphere.

'Enter the second generation,' said Miss Pendergast to him when he went to see her. 'It upsets my ideas as to my own place in the scheme of things, Donald. My dear boy, you're rapidly becoming my equal—yes, it's quite grey on the temples, really—and those crow's-feet! But they are the effect of scanning the horizon for a sail, I

suppose. And the third generation are all out of nursery; nothing stands still, even here. Except your monastery. I shall go there for a month of pure peace before I die, Donald—turn all you Ruths out, of course. I shan't want humans, only the dim religious air. I can't think why you aren't all of you more devout—monks and priests, and all kinds of things.'

'Humphrey appears to be meditating something of the sort,' his father said.

'Dear boy, yes; and I can't think why. He'll never be able to compose his sermons, will he? Oh, you're his father, by-the-way; I beg your pardon, Donald. But literary facility really isn't his strong point, is it? You mustn't mind what I say; I look upon those boys as kind of great-nephews or something, you know—quite my own property. Donald, your father is quite wonderful, isn't he? Seventy-two last birthday, actually! I can give him eight years, but I declare I might be his aunt, to look at us. Oh, do you think not? That's very polite of you, dear Donald. And aren't you delighted to find your sons such fine strapping fellows?'

'There seems plenty of them, certainly,' admitted Captain Ruth. 'We run big, I suppose, most of us. Not quite enough of Charlie, though, do you think? A bit weedy, eh?'

'Weedy? Not a bit of it—slim, that's all. The boy's a picture, Donald, really a picture; I always want to frame him. So different from the gaunt and sallow Verney, isn't he? I hope that boy isn't going to grow much taller; really, he isn't beautiful enough to stand it.'

'Verney?' Captain Ruth's somewhat slow wits revolved round this topic for a moment. 'Bit of a scapegrace, I hear,' he observed.

'You would, no doubt,' she said, and he looked at her, a touch puzzled.

'Gambles, don't you know, and that sort of thing,' he said vaguely. 'My father seems a bit uneasy about him.'

'So I've observed. I'm not qualified to give an opinion, because Verney happens to be a great friend of mine. We play chess together, and I'm sorry to say he always beats me.'

'Yes; he beats Agnes, too.' The tranquil outline of the statement she filled in with vivid colours. 'He's got the chess,' added the Captain, after a moment's pause—'got the knack with his pencil, too.'

'He's got a few things,' Miss Prendergast said. They were not looking at each other. 'Verney's like his mother, though,' she added, with apparent irrelevance.

There was a momentary pause.

'Agnes says the boy is eaten up with conceit,' resumed Captain Ruth, smiling a little.

'Oh, not eaten up—nibbled at, maybe. He's twenty, you know—a crude and theoretical age. Yes, he dogmatizes, I grant Agnes that, and the more ridiculous the theory, the more dogmatic he is on it. Very wearing, I admit.'

Captain Ruth remained silent and thoughtful for about half a minute. Then he turned his direct eyes upon her face.

'Heard from Meyrick lately?' he said.

She had not been expecting the question, and looked up sharply.

'Well, what's lately?'

'I suppose you have,' he concluded stolidly. 'He seems to have been in rather deep waters; no doubt he told you, though. He told me. I saw him, just for a day, when I touched at New

Orleans. Don't know what he was doing there. Seemed to be rather one of his down times.' He stopped for a moment. 'How much did you send him?' he asked.

The shrewd old face coloured faintly.

'My dear Donald, isn't that rather between my godson and me?'

'I suppose it's an impertinent question,' he said meditatively, regarding the toe of one large boot, 'but I should like you to answer it, if you don't mind. No, not that really; but because it makes things rather difficult if one doesn't know what his circumstances actually are at the moment. I'm speaking to my father about him, you see.'

'What his circumstances are?' she repeated, leaning slightly on the verb. He caught the inflection and its signification.

'No, it isn't much guide to that, is it?' he said; 'but—if it was *quite* lately?'

'It was in May, and the sum was—not a large one,' she said quickly. 'You needn't take it into account. Of course, in speaking to your father you wouldn't—'

'No,' he said quietly. 'Naturally I shouldn't.'

'I don't think I'm a weak person,' she went on, after a moment; 'but—well, it was my birthday, you see, and he'd written to me. It was that that fetched me; it was so neat—so pre-eminently Meyrick. It made me laugh; but I felt it only due to the fitness of things to play my part, the godmotherly part.'

'Just so,' he said. Then, after a moment, 'I think my father will probably increase his allowance a little; I shall suggest it. I think he's genuinely been rather in straits.'

'And so Agnes is going to settle down here

for the present ?' said Miss Prendergast, after a moment. 'She won't find it quite intolerably dull, mured up in the country ?'

'Shouldn't wonder if she did after a bit,' the sailor said.

Miss Prendergast, who had heard Mrs. Donald Ruth describe her father-in-law as 'a fussy old soldier,' and his home as 'a ruined convent place on a draughty hill,' looked dubious. Between the two ladies there existed a very exterior friendship. 'A clever old thing, but not a bit sympathetic,' said the younger, and the elder, briefly, 'A spiteful little cat.'

'And you've no hankerings to leave the service and settle down yourself, Captain Donald ?'

He smiled and shook his head.

'Not yet, I think.'

CHAPTER IV

THE SECOND GENERATION

THIS from a letter from Mr. Horace Stanton-Ford, Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, to his sister, Mrs. Donald Ruth; written, it may be added, early in the term in which Verney Ruth took his degree.

‘ . . . Yes, your egregious brother-in-law has turned up here in full force; he’s staying at the Randolph. He can afford it, can he? I am glad to hear it. Personally, I think him a plausible fellow, and should be glad to ask him to dinner. Helen won’t hear of it, however. My own acquaintance with the gentleman was always of the slightest, as you know. We nod when we meet: that is all. He has a tranquil air of well-being which I covet. You say he has starved, periodically and frequently, in the slums of New York: give me leave to doubt it. He is not of those who will ever get on to more than distant bowing terms with their last crust—crust, did I say? The word suits poorly with our subject; cutlet, I would say rather. You will gather that I like him; I am, in fact, more than a little attracted. Well, and why not? He’s a person of intelligence; you will agree with me that that is the main thing. He has a fine presence, and, to judge from his eye, a shrewd

appreciation of a joke. Helen, as I tell her, suffers from a touch of the Nonconformist conscience; also, I gather, Colonel Ruth. So your estimable monastery wouldn't open its gates to the prodigal—the prodigal rolling in wealth, too, which makes the less excuse. I think that mistaken. Gentlemen of means have a right to be taken at their own valuation. And hasn't he hidden his diminished head long enough? I think there is a failure in charity here. Well, it brings its own punishment, for that has come to pass which your careful father-in-law has most worked to avert: his corrupting son and corruptible grandson walk the streets of Oxford hand-and-glove. Your nephew Verney, I surmise, no longer works—prepare Colonel Ruth for a shock when the schools lists appear—instead he parades the streets at his father's side. Let us hope he is combining instruction with amusement, and showing him the colleges. The two would appear to have sworn eternal friendship; I am sorry for your Colonel's peace of mind. I do not think his son and grandson are alike—tell him that from me, since he has not the wit to see it for himself—but they seem to entertain each other immeasurably. Neither, I suppose, lacks conversation; both, too, apparently, have artistic leanings. On one of the few occasions on which I met Meyrick Ruth in old days, I remember I was struck by what seemed to me genuine and unexpected discernment in that direction. Master Verney, I fancy, thinks we might ask his parent to dinner; I detect in his manner a faint aloofness. His father bears no grudge—not he. It is a fine and praiseworthy thing to suffer from no false pride; don't you agree with me? Well, your relatives appear to

have absorbed my letter rather; but in truth the situation interests me. I might add, for your father-in-law's edification, that his anxiously reared and highly corruptible grandson is a person who will probably take his own line about things. If it were the impressionable Charles, now—but I won't pander to you by laying slights on your own charming and not at all sufficiently appreciated offspring. As to your nephew, he is of course obstinate—he's a Ruth, isn't he?—and, you say, conceited. Well, I daresay he may be; but he's got a head on his shoulders, and I should be surprised if he played the fool. If he did, it would be not at haphazard and from impulse, but with an immense deliberation, pleasing to watch. As it is, hold out hopes to the Colonel that Verney may regenerate Meyrick rather than Meyrick corrupt Verney. Both appear to me equally improbable. . . .

'Awfully silly of Verney,' wrote Mrs. Donald in return, 'to take up his father like that. The Colonel getting heated to explosive point, fuming round like a fussy old hen; of course, not saying anything to me—I'm a rank outsider and no Ruth—but writing long letters to Donald, telling him all about it. At least, I suppose he tells him all about it. Don't imagine Donald tells me a word of it! Poor old thing! there is nothing he can well do, that's the fact. I imagine he curses the mines that have made his precious son independent (for the present) of him and his support. If I know Meyrick Ruth, the independence is a very temporary affair, however; the time will come when he will crawl back hungrily for doles from the paternal purse, and then—back to the States, Jericho, or the South Pole! I fancy

he will decide it more agreeable to thrive in exile than to starve at home. It is a useful weapon which his stern parent holds over his head. The Colonel knows well that the prodigal will not dig, and though to beg he is far from ashamed, that amounts to little in a hard world. Remains the paternal allowance. At present he is forfeiting it: but, as I said, I think that reckless opulence will not last. Like him? Of course, you like him; why on earth not? Personally, I consider him a gem among the Ruths; he is veritably amusing. What else is there? On this chilly moor, fell, whatever they call it, he would be a godsend. No one amuses me much in these regions except the old Prendergast lady; she and I prick at each other like a couple of needles; it amuses both of us. We play chess together, too, which is a consolation; and, as I can beat her, I prefer it to playing with my nephew. Yes, there is her nephew too, I should have said, who amuses me—a most curious miscellany of unlooked-for items of knowledge, all flowing together in a brain devoid of compartments; he is of a certain originality, or what passes for such in the country, but vague to silliness. Tell Helen from me that she is wrong. She misses the chance of being really entertained, which is always a pity in my view; but I can fancy her uncomfortable, “One must draw the line somewhere!” against which argument is useless. I am before long going up to London. The fell air oppresses me to desolation; I am really not a bit well. I must winter abroad this year, that is certain. I weary of scolding Charlie for running into debt; the boy is a nuisance. I will say this for the Colonel, he is far kinder to my youngest son than he deserves. Charlie, I am afraid, takes

after his prodigal uncle in some ways, without, however, any of the acuteness which distinguishes Meyrick, and I mean no slur at all on my son's honesty, which is transparent. I think he could not dissemble if he would. The guile in the younger generation is, of course, all appropriated by my interesting nephew. I think his grandfather would scarcely be surprised if he were convicted of abstracting loaves from a baker's cart in the Oxford streets. I do not know into what dark orgies my father-in-law's uneasy mind follows his son and grandson from day to day. He reads his *Times* with scrupulous attention; possibly he expects some paragraph to strike his eye describing the robbery of an Oxford shop by a depraved father and misled undergraduate son. . . . If my clever nephew has brains enough to know which side his bread is buttered, he will not long continue to find his father so attractive a companion as he apparently does at present. Filial affection, however pleasing from the point of view of the sentimentalist, may prove in this case less admirable from that of the utilitarian than grand-filial regard. . . .'

The filial affection Mrs. Ruth disapproved (she, most emphatically, must rank among the utilitarians rather than the sentimentalists) was, in its nature, a picking up of old threads. It is not a maxim wise to maintain that those who please a man's fancy at six will continue to please it at three-and-twenty; but early affection will be found, all the same, a not unsubstantial platform on which to erect the edifices of later years. Mr. Horace Stanton-Ford was quite right in saying 'they seem to entertain each other immeasurably,' and in attributing the fact, in part,

to the liking both felt for good company, and to certain interests they held in common. He might, had he had more knowledge of the concern, have also attributed something to the admiration of a small boy for the manhood, and the only half-comprehended chaff, and the round, moonlike, single eyeglass of a man who was to him somewhat of a stranger, looming only occasionally on the horizon, but always to fascinate the child, and light up the small square face with smiles of amused wonder.

Verney Ruth, his memory groping back over the years to the dim beginnings of things, had not to seek for these threads; they fell lightly into his hands, and he picked them up, inevitably, without conscious purpose. He sat collecting his dazed wits with knitted brows. That was at the very beginning of it. The somewhat startling situation, which had abruptly evolved itself, he had taken with an outward stoical calm. His main comment on it when, on the first Sunday in term, a pleasant-faced man had walked into his rooms with an amused 'Oh, you're Verney, are you? I'm your father. What?' was (after a prolonged stare), 'Good Lord! I believe you are!'

That had been the prologue to the drama which was entertaining Mr. Stanton-Ford and his sister.

At that first interview the two had struck some common ground, each feeling pleasure in the discovery. It was significant how, even in this early intercourse, a certain similarity of standpoint revealed itself. This similarity was a thing not hitherto experienced by Verney among his near relatives—a thing indefinite, indefinable, revealed vaguely in the turn of a phrase, the twinkle of a glance.

Meyrick Ruth, during that first visit, let his shrewd eyes rove round his son's room, seeking, perhaps, to discover in it touches of personality which should indicate to him the character of its owner. There was no great distinctiveness in the room, however; it was that of an undergraduate, and there did not remain much more to say about it, except that it was, presumably, that of an undergraduate who was fond of drawing. Meyrick Ruth's glance took in, carelessly, the piles of scattered books that strewed the floor and the window-seat, the racquet on the writing-table, the cricket bat standing upright in an armchair, half-bound, the boxing-gloves tossed into two corners, the drawings, at all stages of incompleteness, that generously littered the tables and chairs, the board under the sofa, covered over with a damp cloth. At that last he glanced with interest.

'Oh! so you do clay-work. May I see?'

'Oh, those; they're just rot, you know. If you like.'

He lifted the cloth. Meyrick Ruth bent over the board with some interest. There were two or three heads, at various stages of emergence from the chaotic.

'The merest rot,' explained Verney. 'Of course I haven't got the hang of it in the least. I just try a few men I know for fun sometimes.'

Meyrick nodded. His lazy blue eyes had assumed a penetration acutely shrewd. That, later, became a familiar look to Verney; he did not know that it was also one of his own.

'Anyone could see you know nothing whatever about it,' Meyrick observed. 'But, granting that, those aren't altogether bad; might be worse, at least. Who's that?'

He nodded at one more finished than the rest, the square face of a boy, with something of alertness in the set of the blank eyes.

'Oh, just a man I know; friend of mine. Denham's his name.'

'H'm. Badly you've done the hair, haven't you?'

'Well, yes. He's got rather ugly hair, that's the fact.'

'Poor fellow! Pass it here. I could do something to that ear, you know . . . That better?'

'Well, it is. Do you do the sort of thing at all?'

'I was rather keen once. No, I never had a chance to learn much about it; too lazy, too, I daresay. So you've inherited my talents? I hope you'll improve them. . . . Which reminds me, we've spent our short acquaintanceship partly in discussing my affairs, but we don't seem to have touched on yours yet. Give me a cigarette. Yes; and now, what are you proposing to do with yourself in life? Bar—business—diplomacy—what? Going to give us a display of fireworks to wind up with first, I suppose?'

'I'm afraid not. Well, I believe there's a sort of idea of my staying up another year and trying for a fellowship—a travelling thing, you know—the Benton. If I got it I should have to go to Rome for a bit, and grub round among the ruins; rather a joke, you know; I shouldn't half mind it. Only you have to publish some rot or other before you've done. 'Tisn't the least likely I shall get it, though, and of course I shan't try for it unless I get a first. I shall go in for the bar if I don't.'

'I wouldn't do that.'

'Why not?'

'Tedious—very tedious.'

'A jolly sight more amusing than the army,' said Verney, referring to his father's early career.

Meyrick's brows rose whimsically. 'And he's a Ruth!'

Meyrick Ruth was pleased to like his son as well as he did. There developed in their relationship a pleasant camaraderie—a refreshing absence of sentiment; of paternal condescension on the one side, and filial subjection on the other, either of which would have bored him excessively. He pronounced his son a good fellow, with a nice appreciation of a joke, and liked him accordingly.

'Not like me,' he reflected, looking shrewdly at his son's large, gaunt frame, and pale, rather irregular face, with the square, prominent jaw and deeply-set eyes, and dark hair that attempted to curl. The only things they shared in common were an implication of amusement in the eyes, and a singular abrupt pleasantness of smile.

'He's a Denzil,' thought Meyrick; 'takes after his mother.'

He himself was fair, massively and broadly built, and of middle height, like his brother Donald, not like Verney, who stood six foot two and ran gauntly to bone; pleasant-faced, with a single eyeglass that heightened the effect of the twinkle in his blue eyes. He was a well-dressed man; possessed, too, of a singularly pleasant and amused chuckle; that also, like the chess, and the 'knack with his pencil,' his son might be said to have 'got.'

Verney sometimes in these days tried to recall the years before the threads broke. In his consciousness there was a group—sometimes of three, oftener of two—himself, a dark and sturdy small boy, who bestrode a loved and dappled

wooden horse—the rasp of the coarse mane seemed to tingle again on his palm; the large man with the eyeglass, who was, it seemed to Verney, only an occasional feature in the scene; and the third and constant element, someone with very bright dark eyes and dark brows—the eyes and brows Verney remembered, and slurred the rest of the face—who, when she was not playing games, or telling the most thrilling or mirth-filling stories, was always writing, and would look up, if he became insistent, with a decisive, ‘You must amuse yourself just now, old man.’ He remembered well the notes of that clear, decided tone. Her occasional, ‘Isn’t that rather a foolish question, Verney?’ that had sometimes come in place of the clear, concise, and satisfying, even when but half comprehended explanation, that custom had taught him to expect, filled him in the retrospect with the old mortification; the infrequent, ‘You’ll understand that some time,’ set his wits groping now for the problems so insoluble, but they were blurred in the mists from which the clear tones rose keenly. One time he remembered them very clearly, and, from the words uttered, constructed out of the shadows a preceding drama. He was being told that he need not say his prayers; he surmised the machinations of nurses as the preceding cause. He remembered vaguely, ‘You can wait till you’re much older . . .’ then (and this, he divined, must have been somehow impressed) ‘and always remember, in everything, that your understanding must lead your feelings, not your feelings your understanding, or else you’ll make a most terrible mess of your life.’ Perhaps it had been the quiver of emotion—very rare, this—that had made him remember the bewildering words. Recalling

them now, it seemed to him that they had struck a personal note, and vibrated with reality.

Separating at the end of the term, the father went to London, the son to Abbots Verney.

Throughout the past two months Meyrick Ruth had suffered a bombardment of curt epistolary counsels to 'leave the boy alone.' It was easier to touch on the subject to the boy himself by word of mouth. Colonel Ruth had wrapped himself for the past five-and-twenty years or so in a garment of sensitive and fierce reserve. No one, except at times his son Donald, and very rarely his friend Miss Prendergast, ever saw him without it. He came now, with an effort, to the decision that it must be a little loosened; and before the eyes of him before whom, of all others, he had liefest have worn it close—his youngest grandson.

The respite he gave himself was till the appearance of the schools lists, which were to decide Verney's career, at least for the next year. When they appeared, the Colonel, though of course pleased, felt himself deprived of a useful and valuable illustration to his prospective discourse on corrupting influences. He felt that a third might have better suited with his purpose than a first.

Coming out that evening, he found his grandson extended on the tennis lawn, reading 'Alice through the Looking-glass.'

'Slack. Ought to be doing something more energetic than that, a fine evening like this,' said instinct in the disciplinarian. In the neat vigour and completeness of grey tweed, boots, and a walking-stick, he looked with disfavour on the long, lounging figure in an old blazer and pumps.

'Needs keeping up to the mark,' thought the Colonel; 'mustn't be allowed to lounge so

much.' He called across the lawn, 'What are you going to do with yourself this evening?'

Verney, who had been going to go on as he had begun, looked up, murmuring, 'But I was thinking of a way to feed one's self on batter, and so go on from day to day. . . . Well, I hadn't thought of anything. If you're going a walk, I'll come.'

The Colonel watched the long athletic figure pull itself lazily up. 'Be quick then,' he said gruffly, and waited, swinging his stick restlessly, and frowningly framing his purposed discourse in his mind, till his grandson joined him.

They walked rapidly—Colonel Ruth was still a good pedestrian—down the garden and across the grey bridge that crossed the Abbey moat, out on to the hill, that glowed like answering fire to the yellow flame of the sky, breathing into the still evening air the hot cocoanut sweetness of the blazing bushes. Below them the grey, scrambling village of Verney struggled a little way up the hill, and the Ruths took the winding, cow-trodden path that led through it and out into the deep lanes beyond, looking up from whence Abbots Verney stood high and indomitable, cresting the hill's brow, very grey against the yellow sky, with the sunset flaring between the little cloisters and behind the chapel's low steeple and cross, and making a crimson glory of the great rose refectory window.

'Well, so you've not done with Oxford yet,' the Colonel said, gruff and curt, because he was leading the way to difficult and bitter places, and it made him angry.

'No, I'm jolly glad,' said Verney. 'I shan't half mind another year of it.'

'Don't want to have done with it all, then?'

'Oh, it's beastly, going down.'

'You enjoyed this last term—hey?' The Colonel shot at him a quick glance of scrutiny.

'Very much.'

There was quite a long pause before the Colonel spoke again. His voice had become a little strained; he was nearing the point which he dreaded, and would have shunned if he could. But, being a Ruth, his resolution was indomitable.

'Yes. Had your father with you, didn't you?'

Verney glanced at him sideways for a moment.

'Yes.'

The waters of bitterness lapped at Colonel Ruth's shrinking feet, and he stepped in grimly.

'He—your father—has come back to England for the present, you know. For how long, I can't say. His coming has made it necessary for me to touch on a subject I hoped need never be mentioned between us. I mention it now only because I have to warn you.' The Colonel paused; turning for a moment to look to the west, he seemed to take strength to continue from the stern, grave lines of Abbots Verney against the yellow sky. 'You see, that'll be yours,' he said simply. Then, after a moment, 'It would, of course, have been your father's; he forfeited his right to it; it remains for you to prove your own. Well, that doesn't matter now; I don't like talking like this, and I don't want to get high-flown. I'll just tell you what I've got to tell you, and have done. . . . I don't know, of course, how much you've understood, or guessed, of the true state of things, all your life. . . . No, don't interrupt—it's got to be told.'

'It's only,' said Verney, 'that he told me himself what I suppose you mean. He told me on the first day we met.'

‘He did?’ The Colonel looked at him sharply
‘What did he tell you? How much?’

Verney reddened slightly under his sallow skin.

‘Oh, I don’t know. I suppose, you know, the things you’re thinking of.’

‘Things? Which things? There are a good many things,’ the gruff old voice grew savage.

‘I don’t see any point in my hearing them,’ Verney said awkwardly.

‘You don’t? Well, you don’t suppose it’s pleasant to me to have to tell them, do you? I don’t enjoy it any more than you do; we’ve both got to make up our minds to an unpleasant job, and that’s all about it. It’s only right and fair that you should know what you’re about—you can see that, I suppose? Well, to put it shortly, Meyrick—your father—played the fool all along the line, almost from the very beginning. He began by being expelled from Eton; he went into the service, and after a few years was expelled from that—for embezzlement—did he tell you that?’

‘More or less.’ Verney’s face was impassive.

‘He lived in idleness then, gambling and running up debts, and never paying any of them, as far as I know. Donald and I did that, and various over-kind friends of his. It used to come out, from time to time, that he had—had won money at cards by unfair means.’ It would seem, from the intensified bitterness of the gruff tone, that this wound had been the deepest and sorest and the worst to heal. ‘At last, having no money to go on with for the moment, he forged an acceptance. It was discovered. There was no prosecution, owing to the kindness of the friend concerned. We were able to hush it up more or less. If it hadn’t been for the name, and for all of our sakes, I think

it might have been better to prosecute ; as it was, he went abroad, to America. I forbade him to return to England. I gave him a regular allowance, and left him to shift for himself. I took you to live with me, and suggested that there should be no communication. He has shown no inclination to disregard the suggestion—not until now. Now, being independent of me, he has returned home, after seventeen years. He came here ; I told him he need not do that again. I can have nothing to do with him as long as he disregards my wishes and remains in England. He knows that very well. I have heard enough of his career in the States to assure me that he is, and has been, the same as he always was. He is not’—the Colonel paused a moment, and swallowed something hard in his throat—‘he is not the sort that improves.’

They walked on for a little in silence.

‘I’m sorry to have had to tell you this,’ said Colonel Ruth shortly, ‘but you had to know—you’ll see that.’

‘He told me most of it himself,’ said Verney.

‘Well, well ; and now I’ve told you ; and you can take my version as the true and unadorned one. Meyrick—your father—can make anything seem plausible, unfortunately.’

‘He didn’t try. He simply told me.’

‘And what did you say ?’

‘Don’t remember that I said anything. I knew before, I suppose, that there’d been something or other ; no fool could have helped knowing. Oh, he asked me, I believe, if I wanted him to clear out, or something.’

‘And you said ?’

‘Oh, I don’t know. Don’t think I said anything special—there wasn’t anything to say.’

(To be more precise, Verney, engrossed in lighting a cigarette, had turned slightly red, and muttered something like 'rotters,' shyly adding after a moment, 'Oh, you'll have a whisky and soda, won't you?')

'Of course I didn't want him to clear out,' said Verney, after a moment. 'He was awfully decent to me all last term, and I was jolly glad whenever he looked me up. It was his business, not mine, what he'd told me. I'd no business interfering with things he'd done.'

'You like him ; you're fond of him ?'

'Yes.'

'Of course ; everybody is. That's the pity of it, the danger of it. He attracts people ; they think him a good sort—clever, too. He could always do everything better than Donald. Chess, whist, billiards—he was fine at all of them. Yes, you've got that from him—the drawing, too.'

It was a strange admixture of bitterness and genuine, simple pride. On Verney's past new lights seemed to break. A slow flush conveyed the fact. The Colonel saw it.

'But God grant you've got nothing else,' he said, gruff and hardly audible. 'I've always been afraid for you, Verney—a good deal afraid. You're so like in some ways, you see ; I feared in all. Just of late—the last few years, since you grew up—I've begun to hope more. After all, training must come into it. I spoiled Meyrick ; I never spoiled you ; I determined against that from the first.'

Verney smiled a little grimly.

'You've shown some sense at Oxford,' went on the Colonel—'poor Charlie, and the rest of it.'

(Charlie Ruth had afforded his cousin more than one opportunity of dragging him, with grim

determination, out of holes in which he had all but sunk. 'Next time you feel like making a fool of yourself like that,' Verney observed, scathingly unkind, after one of these occasions, 'you can jolly well call yourself Smith and go to Cambridge and play the giddy goat in your own way.' Owing largely to his cousin's efforts, Charlie had, contrary to the expectation of his friends, managed to remain at Oxford during the normal three years. Since then he had been learning land-agency.)

'And I want you to go on showing sense now,' said Colonel Ruth. 'You see what I'm afraid of for you, don't you?'

'Embezzement, gambling, and forgery,' said Verney to himself, but made no other response.

'I'm afraid,' went on the Colonel, 'that you and he will make friends—that you will get under his influence.'

'Yes; we have made friends.'

The Colonel struck his stick sharply on the ground.

'Your friendship will stop where it is, then. You say it very glibly. Do you feel all I've told you, all he told you himself, no barrier at all? Do you feel you can make friends as you would with—with——'

'It's no business of mine,' Verney said. 'I mean, people have a right to be taken at what they show you of themselves. You can't rake up all the old reports about them, and sheer off because, ages ago, they've done something you don't like. You take them as they are, and everyone you like is so much gained. . . . He's been most awfully decent to me. There was no reason why he should have taken so much notice of me; he knows a long sight more about every-

thing than I do, of course ; and—and if he wants to make friends, 't isn't very likely I should be such an ass—and such a prig—as not to be pleased.'

He spoke quickly, with a certain abrupt vehemence. Verney had a habit of knowing his own mind.

Colonel Ruth looked at him a little grimly.

'So that's your theory—that it makes no odds what a man's done in the course of his life ? We're to judge our acquaintances by what's on the surface only, eh ? It may land you in some awkward scrapes that, young man, before you've done.'

'Judge ?' Verney caught up the word impatiently. "'T isn't one's business to judge the people one knows ; you can just take what you like and leave what you don't, fortunately. Oh !' he broke off, the strangeness of the situation striking him to half-irritated laughter, 'it seems rummy, talking like this, doesn't it ?'

'About your father ? Yes. That can't be helped. You'll get used to it in time, like the rest of us.' The accumulated bitterness of the years vibrated in the curt tone.

Emerging suddenly from the deep lane, they were on a little open path, winding through a field. Single file being necessitated, Colonel Ruth obtained a good view of his grandson's square-shouldered and indefinitely dogged back. He addressed himself to it with sudden, rising anger.

'We appear to disagree fundamentally on this point. I hoped you'd feel what I've told you a barrier ; I hoped after hearing it you wouldn't wish for further intercourse. I was wrong, it seems ; it makes no difference to you.'

If Verney had not been a Ruth, and obstinate

at that, he would have permitted himself to be candid, and to say 'It makes a good deal.' If the Colonel had not also been a Ruth, and dense at that, he would have rightly amplified into this the slight involuntary protest of the head.

Getting from the dogged back no denial in words, the Colonel's anger deepened.

'It makes no difference to you,' he repeated. 'Well, I'm sorry for it; but I presume my expressed wishes will have some effect. I don't choose that you and he shall have anything to do with each other. That's fairly plain, isn't it?'

'Yes,' said Verney.

'Well, do you intend to obey me?'

It was the old martinet voice, and bore with it many reminiscences. It had been wont to make Verney nervously resentful. It made him slightly resentful now, even though he comprehended and pitied the underlying feeling.

'I don't see how I can say quite straight off like that,' he said, frowning a little in perplexity. 'It's no good asking me things of that sort, grandfather. I'm sorry, but don't you see yourself it's impossible for me to promise not to see anything of my father? I couldn't refuse to see him, even if I wanted to, which I shouldn't, you see. I mean, after all, he has a right, I suppose——'

'No right,' Colonel Ruth broke in fiercely. 'He has no rights of any sort—no rights over his home, no rights over you; he's forfeited them all. If you wish to give up your home and your friends and your good name, and join forces with your father, say so, but don't talk to me of rights. If you come to talk of rights, I suppose I've got a few myself. You don't appear to think I've a right to dictate to you, but I have anyhow the

right to say that you must choose; it's a fair choice—your father against the rest of us. You can make it at your leisure.'

'One can't settle things like that,' Verney expostulated hopelessly. 'There's no choice about it; I don't see any choice. I mean, you can't really mind my seeing my father sometimes, do you? 'Tisn't likely to amount to much, because I shall be working, and he won't be at Oxford much, I don't suppose, but of course I shall see him sometimes. And—and shall you mind awfully when I do?' The abrupt question was reminiscent, vaguely, of some much earlier scene.

'Yes,' said the Colonel shortly, 'I shall. I've told you so.'

'I'm sorry,' Verney said simply. 'There doesn't seem to be any way out of it, then.'

'Except mine,' said the Colonel, 'which you don't choose to take.'

They had stopped at a stile, and leaned against it for a minute, turning to watch the red flame die in the sky and Abbots Verney cresting the hill, black against the translucent sea of fire. Colonel Ruth, seeing it, struck his stick sharply on the ground.

'Don't disgrace yourself,' he said, with sudden abrupt vehemence. 'Don't you go and play the deuce with your life, too, I can't stand it. Don't you suppose I see what all this is leading to? The old thing—my God—the same old damned thing! And if it comes to that—well, I hope I may die first. I couldn't stand it—not another time. All these years—and at the end the same old damned thing!'

Verney turned his eyes slowly from the red west to the stern, quivering face, and looked at it in silence for a moment.

'Till I've done anything,' he said abruptly, 'I don't think that's quite fair.'

In the silence that followed the stern face seemed to age and weary suddenly. Compassion mastered resentment in Verney, seeing it.

'I won't, you know,' said Verney, short and awkward.

The Colonel looked at him with a bitter wistfulness.

'I hope you mayn't,' he said; and at the words the bridge of comprehension which had been suddenly extended towards him, to use, if he so cared, was abruptly withdrawn, and not offered again.

'Shall we come home?' said Verney.

They walked home in silence, two resentful and obstinate men. A spectator walking behind them would not have found, between the unyieldingness of their back views, a point to choose.

CHAPTER V

CAPTAIN RUTH GIVES ADVICE

WHEN Captain Ruth and his wife, at the end of July, were staying in London, their brother Meyrick, who was also in London, called on them. Mrs. Ruth, finding the card, said :

‘So Meyrick’s been. We must ask him to dinner.’

He came to dinner, and made himself very agreeable.

‘Why can’t Donald tell a story like that?’ his sister-in-law demanded of herself irritably. She took her nephew’s view, that a man’s past vagaries are no one’s concern but his own, and if he is pleased to make himself an agreeable companion, the rest of the world may well be thankful to take him at that, the commodity not being of the most frequent. She would fain have acquainted herself with her husband’s views on the subject of his reprobate brother, but Captain Ruth was not given to disburdening himself.

Meyrick and he had last met three years ago, at an American port. Meyrick had then been of an aspect more than a little disreputable. It had been, as his brother had remarked to Miss Prendergast, one of his down times. He had, for the nonce, almost lost the easy man-of-the-world air that had clung to him through all his vicissitudes. It had returned now ; he was again the man about

town, well dressed, personable, agreeable. A stranger observing the brothers as they smoked together after dinner, would easily have known them for such; both had the same massive build—the elder, perhaps, the more inclined to run to flesh—the same square jaw, fair colouring, and blue eyes, only the eyes of the elder had a greater shrewdness and a more frequent twinkle, while those of the younger looked with a certain, grave and steady directness. The elder was, by several degrees, the better-looking man.

‘It seems queer to be in town again,’ observed Meyrick Ruth, after they had smoked in silence for nearly five minutes. Characteristically, the one smoked a pipe, the other a very good cigar.

Captain Ruth nodded.

‘Shall you stay?’ he inquired after a moment.

‘I think so.’ Meyrick mused for a minute ‘I certainly don’t admit any obligation on my part to keep away from England for the rest of my natural life. What?’

‘Quite your concern,’ said the sailor impassively.

‘Well, I can afford it now, you see.’

There was a minute’s silence.

‘You heard, I dare say, that I went down to Abbots Verney?’

‘Yes, I heard that.’

‘I went on the merest chance. I wasn’t welcomed, of course, so I came away.’

Captain Ruth nodded silently.

‘Bygones, it appears, are not bygones at Abbots Verney,’ said his brother, contemplatively regarding the cigar between his finger and thumb.

‘No, they are not.’ On that head, it seemed, Captain Ruth had no doubt.

'Frankly, now, Donald, is it your opinion that they ever will be?'

The question seemed to be asked as one of purely impersonal and abstract interest.

Captain Ruth sucked at his pipe meditatively.

'No, I don't think they will.'

The reply was received without change of expression.

'Will you use your influence?'

'As far as it goes. It's not far.'

'I don't know how it appears to you,' said Meyrick, after a moment, 'but it strikes me that this sort of thing has been carried about as far as it reasonably should. There should be a limit even to the consequences of great folly, and I'm not minimising mine. I'm not minimising it, but I've paid fairly heavily for it, haven't I?'

To that Captain Ruth said nothing.

'However,' his brother went on, 'it seems I'm still to pay. I'm not to be received by my relations, and I'm not to have anything to do with my son. A little hard, that, don't you think? I don't think I should corrupt Verney. I've seen a good deal of him during these two months; he seems to have survived it so far; he's done very well at his lessons, and he's picked no pockets as yet, I think.'

The good-humoured irony of his brother's bitterness was a perpetual puzzle to Captain Ruth. It came down now between them like a wall.

'I should advise you to let Verney alone,' said Captain Ruth, after a moment.

Meyrick's brows rose.

'For whose sake? His, mine, or my father's? if I may ask.'

Captain Ruth considered.

'All three,' he pronounced. 'You'll interfere both with his prospects and your own, if you run after him. No good doing that. My father won't stand it, you know.'

'No?' Meyrick laughed curtly. 'It's sometimes supposed that a father has certain rights in his own son—what?'

Donald Ruth did not appear to think that this observation called for response.

'But I've none over mine, eh? Forfeited 'em all, haven't I?' suggested his brother easily. 'Well, I dare say that's fair enough. After all, I should be—there's no denying it—rather staggered if the boy began to come the rights business over me—and my pocket; so I've no intention of coming the heavy father over him. Live and let live always strikes me as a first-class working rule. But I think one should know one's relatives—one's nearest, anyhow. Otherwise the situation strikes me as a little absurd. I don't care about being one of the central figures in an absurd situation; nor does Verney, I'll be bound. He's got an eye for the absurd, that boy has. Besides, from a selfish point of view—well, I've none too many friends. A few men in town, to whom I'm not passionately attached—no one at home (except the old Prendergast lady) whom I could rely upon to give me so much as a dinner if I asked them for it; you and Agnes, when you're not under the paternal roof—I suppose I may call you friends, what? And that's all. The Denzils haven't a word to say to me, of course. Verney tells me he never sees anything of them himself; queer of them, isn't it, considering how like the boy is to Margaret. I suppose they think the Denzil in him is only skin-deep, and the rest's wicked Ruth. Well, you

see my friends are limited in number; I should be glad to add my son to the list, if I could.'

'I think,' said Donald Ruth slowly, 'if you try that on much at present, you'll be rather defeating your own ends. I should wait a few years. You won't gain anything by making friends with Verney now; on the other hand, he may lose a good deal, unless you're pretty careful.'

His elder brother contemplated him for a minute with shrewd eyes. His face in thought was a very clever one.

'You may be right,' he said at length. 'I should be sorry if that happened, certainly. You think it's on the cards?'

'Certainly.'

Meyrick Ruth was lost in thought for a moment. Then he roused himself and laughed a little.

'You're an uncommonly good old fellow, Donald, aren't you, come to think of it. Of course it's only right, though, that the place should be kept in the right branch—what?'

'Depends,' said Captain Ruth placidly.

Meyrick laughed again.

'On whether it's the prodigal or the prodigal's exemplary son who's in question? Yes, I suppose it does. Well, I shall take your advice, Donald, and let my young hopeful alone for the present. I dare say he'll do his lessons all the better without my help, eh? Meanwhile I shall have to put up with my nephews—what? Not afraid I shall corrupt them, are you?'

'Not in the least. You won't see enough of them, for one thing. Besides, it's an idea peculiar to my father, I imagine, that people are so easily corrupted as that.'

'Ah, yes. Pity he's got it.'

'It has always been rather a pity for Verney, I believe,' said Captain Ruth.

'Yes ; poor old Verney. Sad case of heredity, eh ? Well, upon my word, I believe there's something in it, too. Verney and I get on, you know ; we could have decent times together. But I suppose you're right, and it's best not.'

'I should let Verney alone,' repeated Captain Ruth, without any particular display of sympathy or interest.

It was owing to the shrewd respect Meyrick Ruth felt for his younger brother's judgment (a respect that had always gone hand-in-hand with a half-amused contempt for his intellectual powers) that Verney found himself, so to speak, 'let alone' during his last year at Oxford. His father paid him passing visits, during which he made himself exceedingly entertaining and agreeable to his son and his son's friends, and wrote him several pleasant and amusing letters, which Verney was very glad to get. The answering of these letters revealed to him as he wrote the levelness of the plane on which they stood. The writing of a letter frequently serves as a flashlight to illumine existing relations. Verney found that he wrote as he was in the habit of writing to the men of his own age with whom he was intimate. The bar of the generations did not, in effect, here exist. Difference of outlook there was, but not such as to roughly obtrude itself as yet.

Coming home after that year, Verney found in his grandfather a relaxation of orderly-room grimness that came near to geniality. It was not the fellowship with which he came armed that was responsible for this ; it had always at Abbots Verney been tacitly regarded as Verney's business

to do the honours, so to speak, for the family, and if ever he omitted to do so, the Colonel felt aggrieved. But it was borne in upon Verney now that his career at Oxford had been one of creditable reputability; he realized with a smile that he had thereby violated anticipation, and ascended several grades. In truth, as he admitted to himself, the ascent was not difficult; one began so low. One had but to pick no pockets, live within one's income, refrain from making mention of one's losses or gains at cards, and, mildly, do some work, and one found one had gained an altitude more satisfactory than personally flattering. An altitude, that is, merely comparative; when regarded positively, it remained somewhat contemptible. But then, as Verney reflected, if the advance of each ensuing five years was to equal that of those just past, in twenty years or so he might stand at a quite creditable elevation. He pictured himself as a man of forty-five, being asked by the then aged veteran, with the quick look from under shaggy white brows, 'And what sort of men have you been seeing lately—hey?' 'Oh, various men,' he was accustomed now to reply maliciously; 'Robertson and Smith, and Anstey and Stevens . . .' Of the list he was aware that the Colonel was not the wiser for one name; the names of those already known as his friends he carefully avoided, with a perversity perhaps under the circumstances inevitable, and to the Colonel's 'What sort of fellows are they?' his reply, 'Oh well, I like them, you know,' was, and was intended to be, strictly non-explanatory, leaving the grounds of the liking a matter round which suspicion might play if it chose.

Verney promised himself in anticipation that the man of forty-five, if subjected to similar in-

quisitions, should allow himself an outburst, should say, 'Oh, hang it all, I've not been doing any harm, and I'm not going to be called to account like this.' The reason for deferring the matter for twenty years was, perhaps, less grand-filial respect than youthful dislike to a scene. It was easier to give lists of names and occupations than to strip away the veil and lay bare the significance which underlay the questions.

In the course of that summer, Verney, who was of a celibate turn of mind, was severely shocked by his cousin Humphrey announcing himself engaged to be married.

'Who on earth to?' he inquired, his cigarette dropping out of his mouth in his consternation.

'Peggy Lisle,' said the stalwart curate, with creditable equanimity, but vaguely on the defensive.

Verney said, 'Oh! Well, I'm glad it's nobody new and sudden, at all events.' Why on earth Peggy Lisle? he mentally demanded, but added aloud, to comfort himself, 'It won't make much difference one of us being engaged to Peggy, will it?'

'It makes a jolly lot of difference to me, I can tell you,' the curate rejoined hotly. 'And you needn't talk as if it was a sort of family business; no one's engaged to her but me.'

'Oh, I'm not, I know,' Verney said, with hasty fervour, and added, recollecting himself, 'Well, I wish you luck, you know. It's—it's jolly interesting, one of us getting engaged.'

To Miss Prendergast the next day he repeated his question, 'Why on earth Peggy Lisle?'

'Why on earth not Peggy Lisle? It's eminently natural surely. And suitable.'

Verney considered. 'I suppose it is, if you come to think of it. But—well, hang it all——'

'Which are you anathematizing—Peggy or the marriage system?'

He considered again. 'Both. Oh, Humphrey may be right, of course; it's his own affair, I suppose.'

'That's really good of you.'

'And I dare say a vicar has to have a vicaress, and I dare say Peggy won't make half a bad one. But—well, I'm hanged if I can understand what makes a man want to do these things. Isn't it weird?'

'Well, one's fairly used to it by now, you know.'

Verney was fairly launched on a flood of dogmatic fervour.

'Think of it, you know. Here you are, quite on your own, with a little money and whatever work you like to go in for, and prospects of a generally sporting time all round——'

'We aren't all equally fortunate, you know,' she interpolated.

'Doing your own business, and choosing your own friends—and then what must you do but go and ask some footling girl to come and set up shop with you for the rest of both your lives. What do you score? That's what I can't see. Hang it all, if I did want to ask someone to come and live with me, it should be a man, I'm blessed if it shouldn't.'

'Indeed!'

'Girls,' said the dogmatist, 'are all very well to talk to, and to dance with, and to play round with generally; but to live with—not much. Now, a man understands what you're driving at, if he's a decent sort; you wouldn't have to explain things

to him; and you needn't bother to do the polite all the time; and you needn't ask if he minds your pipe; and you can throw cushions at him when he makes himself a bore. Oh, if I must go in for a double establishment, I'll have a man.'

'There is such a thing, though you don't seem to have taken it at all into consideration, as falling in love, you know.'

'I suppose there is,' he admitted. 'In fact, I've seen them do it. Rummy, isn't it? But the person I fell in love with, if I ever did such a thing, is the last person I should think of marrying. Marriage is an important enough thing, I should imagine, to be done with a cool head and one's eyes open, if one does it at all. I should no more think of doing it while I was in that sort of crazy, unbalanced state, than I should of—well, of making my will, say, while I was raving in delirium. No, if ever I was such an ass as to want to marry, I'd go to a sensible, level-headed woman, in a sensible, level-headed way, and ask her if she thought the arrangement would work. But I hope I may never come to that. I should be very sorry.'

'So should I. No, I hope it may never come to that. Well, I congratulate you on your sound common sense and cool judgment. If you ever thoroughly lose your balance and make a complete fool of yourself, come and tell me, and I'll congratulate you again. Life would be quite dull if one didn't start it with a set of red-hot theories, I suppose, wouldn't it? None of yours appear to have been knocked out of you as yet. I wonder if you know, Verney, that a few bad tumbles would do you no harm. Humphrey's done a more sensible thing than you're ever in the least likely to do, let me tell you.'

‘Oh, I can’t marry Peggy Lisle, that’s obvious,’ Verney grinned.

Verney, deeming it more expedient, as certainly it was more comfortable, to be frank, informed the Colonel, with studious impressiveness of manner, that he was going to spend a few days with his father in London. The Colonel looked him sharply up and down, then returned to his newspaper. Verney understood that that topic was at an end, and was relieved at the refreshing avoidance of the superfluous.

In London he saw not only his father but Charlie, who was now agent to a cousin in Kent, and appeared to have leisure at his disposal. The tone of his ‘Uncle Meyrick and I’ Verney took as a matter of course. He had during the past year become used to receiving such gratification from the younger men who made his father’s acquaintance. From Charlie it amounted hardly, perhaps, to a gratification. In Verney’s eyes Charlie’s approval had never come near to being a certificate of merit, even had such certificates existed for so self-dependent a youth. In this case they would have served no object. Verney knew his father for what he was—pleasant, clever, companionable, and admirably amusing; and he admitted no necessity, certainly no desirability, of probing further. Miss Prendergast had accused him of being a person of theories. One of these was that it was one’s pleasure and one’s profit in life to take the good from those with whom one came in contact and let the rest alone. His was an eminently tolerant philosophy—an easy, masculine tolerance, that was, possibly, a heritage from a man for whom the moral side of life did not, in effect, exist. For

Verney it existed, but of those for whom it did not he only demanded that they should not, before his eyes, run aggressively counter to his codes, and he was happy to take them for what they were. To inquiries such as 'What on earth makes you look up that beast so often?' to which he was not unused, his reply would seem to himself admirably adequate—'He plays such a decent hand at bridge,' or 'He's really awfully funny when you get him on racing, you know.' Several consequences followed naturally on this attitude; one was that Verney was a not unpopular person. Another was that those in whom the moral code was more what may be termed vicarious hardly knew what to make of him; on the other hand, those in whom it was less pronounced occasionally miscalculated his attitude, and met with consequent disappointment. Colonel Ruth, vaguely divining the unsatisfactory attitude, felt suspicion uneasily confirmed.

'They seem to let you run on the loose a good deal,' Verney said to Charlie.

'Oh, I do myself fairly well,' that youth replied cheerfully.

'Fat lot of good you must be to them down there,' Verney said.

'A nice boy, Charlie,' Meyrick Ruth observed to his son. 'Not overburdened with brains, though.'

'Oh, old Charlie's a bit of an ass,' said his cousin, 'loses his head rather, and runs into scrapes just from softness. Then he can't get out; he has to be hauled, and a jolly hard business it is, sometimes. The point about him is that anyone can do anything with him who likes; if he gets into a silly set, he'll be silly too, and usually go one sillier. What he wants is some-

one of sense to lead him about on a chain ; he's all right then.'

'Rough luck on him your being out of the way,' suggested Meyrick, with an irony that was always given and taken in good part between his son and himself. 'Doesn't give the poor chap half a chance—what ?'

CHAPTER VI

THE DENHAMS.

VERNEY had been at Oriel with one John Denham, a man two years his junior, who was, incidentally, a friend of his, and had been now for a year living in a flat in Rome in the Via Babuino, with his mother and sister, and learning to paint. He was a square youth, with alert eyes and deft fingers, and moderate artistic gifts that contrasted pleasantly with the sturdy boyish demeanour. In their vigorous sturdiness, mental and physical, their singularly youthful frankness, and their quick, receptive comprehension, Johnny Denham and his young sister (they shared in common artistic leanings, and what they termed their workshop) suggested a couple of bright-eyed and intelligent puppies. One felt that had a ball been thrown for Maggie Denham's amusement, she would have recovered it with the utmost alacrity, intelligence and despatch. She was a square young person, with an attractive face and very bright dark eyes, and a singularly pleasing smile. Verney, having met her two years ago at Denham's home, and played cricket with her, during that phase of her existence when her hair fell in unruly waves down her back, regarded her rather as a nice infant. To Johnny he was attached. Mrs. Denham was a stout and comfortable person, with the jollity of her sporting youth still about her.

To her children's unaccountable tastes she presented a serene lack of comprehension.

'Pity the children should waste their time as they do, isn't it?' she remarked to Verney. 'Maggie's for ever messin' round with clay or somethin' when I want her. Pity, isn't it; because if you take Rome the right way, there's no place where you can have a more sportin' time.'

'Well, mum,' Maggie remonstrated, 'I don't know what you call a sporting time, if we've not been having one lately. We've been awfully energetic.'

'Well, you have done a bit of huntin', certainly,' Mrs. Denham admitted.

'And dinner-parties, mum. And three dances this month.'

Verney sighed a little.

'It's a strenuous place, isn't it. I'd no notion how strenuous till I came here. Well, I don't mind; it's very jolly, of course; but it leaves precious little time for one's own business. And I'm sorry for all the poor wretches who've been written to and told they must ask me to dinner.'

'You know the Cecil Ilberts, don't you?' Maggie said.

Verney reflected. 'Yes; yes, I'm almost sure I know the Cecil Ilberts. Live in the Piazza di Spagna, near the steps, don't they? And he paints. And they know my aunt a little. Yes, I remember; my friend who gave me all those introductions told me he was—or used to be when she knew him—a particularly charming person.'

'Oh, he is, very,' Maggie said. 'He's awfully clever, you know. He's been so decent to us, too—to Johnny and me. They all have. They're all awfully nice.'

'Oh, they're all awfully nice, are they? I must make a note of that and cultivate them.'

'But there are such loads of nice people in Rome, aren't there?' Maggie said. 'It's the jolliest place. Only I wish most of them weren't so frightfully—well, social.'

'Oh, I suppose one has to be social, in Rome,' Verney said vaguely.

'One may be other things as well,' said Maggie the youthful.

'Oh, one may, of course—if one can. And aren't any of them?'

'Lots, of course. Only lots aren't, too. Did you talk to Jane Gerard when you were at the Cecil Ilberts?'

'I'm not aware of having talked to Jane Gerard. Why? Is she one of the merely social?'

Maggie laughed. Her laugh was singularly young and amused.

'Rather not. She isn't social at all. But she's tremendously clever. You'd like her, I expect. I do. I was awfully afraid of her when I first knew her. She doesn't say much, but sits and makes you feel as if she'd think awfully little of you if you said anything at all feeble or silly.'

'How unpleasant, though.'

'But I'm very fond of her now. She's been awfully good to me, and she needn't have been a bit. She's Rosamund's cousin, you know.'

'Rosamund's——?'

'Rosamund Ilbert—you must have seen her?'

'Oh, Miss Ilbert. Yes, I suppose I did. It was a biggish dinner-party, and I was rather bored, because the girl I took in had spotted my shop, and would talk about the Forum. She wanted to know things—at least she didn't, but she pretended she did. Asked questions, you

know, and didn't listen to the answers—you know the way of a certain type. So at last I thought I'd give it her with a vengeance, since she asked for it. And I did. She got fairly bored by the time I'd done. So you see I hadn't much leisure to take stock of Miss Cecil Ilbert.'

Maggie was laughing, with malice.

'She heard about you, you know.'

'No? I'm sure she must have been edified. What did she hear?'

'The girl you were talking to about the Forum told her. She said you were horribly conceited.' Maggie chuckled over the phrase.

'Who said I was horribly conceited? The girl I talked to, or Miss Cecil Ilbert?'

Maggie considered.

'Well, both, I suppose. The girl told Rosamund you were, and Rosamund——'

'Told you.'

Maggie nodded.

'I told her you weren't—not so very. But I think she understood pretty well about it, you know. More than the girl who told her did. She knows the girl, you see. The girl's a donkey.'

'Oh, I know that.'

'Rosamund knows, too. So you see she understood pretty well—all there was to understand.'

'Oh, she did?'

'But you didn't score much by that, because I'm afraid she thought you rather rude.'

'As well as horribly conceited? That's bad.'

'As well as rather conceited,' Maggie amended. Then she bit her lip, and looked at him in tardy remorse.

'Oh, how awful of me to tell you all this!'

'Well, you've done it now. I shan't be able to look Miss Cecil Ilbert in the face in future.'

'Oh, I expect you'll get over it. She's said worse things than that to me before now.'

'And you've got over them?'

Maggie nodded.

'The thing is, they're usually true, you see. You know they're true when she's said them, even if you don't before.'

'So I'm to know that I'm horribly conceited and rather rude?' Verney revolved round the point, resentful.

'Well,' Maggie said, 'I'm sure it was the girl's fault; but I suppose you weren't awfully polite on that occasion, were you? In your feelings, anyhow; and you had to count on her being a donkey and not seeing you were laughing at her.'

'Well, if one mayn't count on that——'

Maggie did not fill in the hiatus by personal expression of opinion.

'Only of course if it's reported to someone who's not a donkey—like Rosamund—they know all about it.'

'And she thinks one shouldn't count on that?'

'She would think so, I suppose.'

Maggie paused on the reply, an apologetic moment.

'H'm! I shall have to steer clear of Miss Cecil Ilbert for the present, that's obvious.'

'I don't think you'll be able. She goes about such a lot.'

'Oh, she's one of the social, is she?'

'Very much one of the social.'

Going downstairs Verney met Johnny Denham, and they walked together to Verney's rooms in the Via della Croce. Verney was meditative. 'What do you do when they try to pump you about your shop?' he demanded abruptly. 'Girls, I mean.'

Denham was vague.

'Don't know ; grin and bear it. They don't, you know, not much.'

'Well'—Verney was manifestly on the defensive—'I think it's a jolly good plan to give them all they want, don't you know—a surfeit, what ?'

'Haven't tried,' Denham said, 'but I dare say it is. I say, come on to Piale's and look which day the hounds meet next week.'

They went to Piale's, and looked through the shelves of Tauchnitzes, and Verney purchased 'Mr. Sponge's Sporting Tour' and the 'Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes.' Then Denham proposed that they should shop, and Verney remembered that he wanted a wedding present for Humphrey and a sponge bag for himself, so they ran the gauntlet of the models with nosegays in the piazza, Denham, less firm and adroit than Verney, emerging from the fray with a bunch of violets forcibly inserted in his button-hole, and proceeded spasmodically down the Via Condotti, inquiring at intervals for a 'spungio-sacco,' which Denham said meant sponge-bag, and finally ending the expedition, as was their invariable doom, with two cakes of brown Windsor soap, which they unwrapped and divided at the door of Verney's rooms in the Via della Croce.

Coming home, Denham found Miss Cecil Ilbert in the drawing-room, and Maggie plying her with a very late tea. Rosamund Ilbert was accustomed to descend upon her friends at any hour in the evening, wearied out with much gadding (as Maggie had said, she was very much one of the social) with an imperious 'I want tea, please,' which could not be denied. She lay back now with a characteristic shamelessness, in a deep lounge chair, with rather tired eyes—her eyes

were rather often tired, and seemed to hold a perpetual whimsical mockery—and watched Maggie operating on the tea.

Johnny came in and stood by the stove.

‘Did you go to Piale’s, Johnny?’

‘Yes. Meet on Tuesday.’

‘What’s that you’ve got? Anything exciting?’

‘Yes; brown Windsor. Ruth and I each got one. Ruth couldn’t get a sponge-bag, though. Sell, wasn’t it?’

‘Ruth . . .’ Miss Ilbert reflected. ‘Oh . . . the young man who wants a snub. . . . So he wants a sponge-bag, too, does he? Tea-cake? How nice for me; thank you, babe.’

Maggie, her lower lip drawn between her teeth, sat down on a footstool and clasped her knees, looking at Rosamund with compunctious and solemn dark eyes, that gave to her, vaguely, the look of a small owl.

‘Rosamund . . . I’m afraid it was rather bad of me, do you know—I told him what you told me the other day. I did it without thinking, somehow. And then I thought it was rather awful of me.’

‘What was it? I don’t remember.’

‘Why, about Hilda Derrincourt—you remember, don’t you? You said he was conceited, and rather rude, and wanted taking down.’

Rosamund put down her cup hastily, with a sudden laugh. ‘You told him——’

Maggie wrinkled her brows.

‘I forget how much I told him—most of it, I’m afraid. We were talking—in fact, he was telling me about himself and Hilda Derrincourt——’

‘Oh, he was, was he? Cheek!’

‘And it just slipped out. It seemed so funny, you see, that I should have heard the other side.’

‘Very funny. Did he see the joke?’

Maggie reflected.

‘Oh, I think he was amused. But—well, a little chagrined too, you know.’

Miss Ilbert laughed silently—a characteristic habit.

‘Well, I hope he was. I dare say it was quite good for him. After all, I dare say it’s just as well you told him, otherwise the spirit might have moved me to do it myself some day, which would have been rude of me and embarrassing for him. I might have said, “Think yourself so clever, don’t you—you and your precious shop, which no one else is allowed to mention!” How awful it would have been. It’s a curse, you know, that habit of mine—but I can’t help it.’

‘What habit?’ Johnny inquired.

‘Speaking to people for their good. Oh, might I have another half-cup? Father always declares someone will rise and slay me for it some day. Yes, I do it to both of you, don’t I? But then you’re so young, it doesn’t seem to matter.’

Johnny hoped this last was addressed to Maggie, but felt doubtful. He himself was younger than the speaker by six months. In Rosamund’s eyes the interval had widened out to a veritable gulf of years; of this Johnny was partly conscious.

Rosamund put down her tea-cup and lay back.

‘Thank you for my nice tea. And now am I to see the workshop?’

‘Yes,’ said Johnny. As he opened the door his square brown face was tinged with a slightly deeper colour.

‘Johnny’s been doing some awful things.’ Maggie followed, slipping her hand, like a companionable child, into Rosamund’s.

'Oh, I expect you've both been perpetrating atrocities,' Rosamund murmured unconcernedly. That's what I'm going to see them for—to be thoroughly rude to them, don't you know.'

It was about a week after this that Verney came to seek out Denham in the workshop. Maggie, meeting him on the stairs, herself in a bedaubed blue smock, informed him that it was 'one of Johnny's very clay days. He's a little cross, too.'

The youth's recognition of Verney was of the slightest. Verney rummaged round the room for cigarettes, came, incidentally, upon other things, and sat down to think them over in a lounge chair, gazing frowningly and absently at the ceiling.

Till this month Verney had not seen Denham for a year. Of the half-divined developments of that interim he was vaguely suspicious. Denham was a slightly older person than of yore; his young enthusiasm for his work, for instance, was tempered; he was a thought graver, more, on occasions, distrait. The two having first known each other as freshman and third-year man, the elements of that relationship still touched their friendship. Denham remained a person to be more or less looked after, to be informed when he was making an ass of himself. The suspicion of such a contingency had just of late dawned upon Verney unpleasantly.

The clay, pulled and pinched through successive phases of grotesque meaninglessness, emerged in turn, Verney Ruth absorbed in thought, brows down, lips twisted awry; Verney looking up, one brow lifted, expectant; finally Verney smiling, sardonically amused—a gruesome production, this last, and, unfortunately for the

modeller, the one which caught the model's eye as he rose and strolled across the room.

'Good heavens!' grunted Verney, arrested by his disgust. Picking up the clay monstrosity he held it afar, between gingerly finger and thumb, as one might lift some noxious insect.

'Never mind it,' the artist said, dejectedly running greasy fingers through his hair; 'I'll squash it up just now.'

'Wish you wouldn't try and model from life,' said Verney Ruth.

'Oh, well, hang it all, that's recognisable, anyhow. You spotted it at once, eh, old man? Not so jolly bad, I don't call that. Flattering, too.' The youth's irrepressible buoyancy of conceit began, as usual, to swing up again under criticism. He had been pulling the clay about in dejected, half sardonic humour, but now his self-confidence surged in him again. 'Of course,' he admitted, surveying his handiwork critically, 'it's you with a difference—through a medium, rather.'

'The medium of your unpleasant temper,' Ruth suggested, and Denham nodded.

'Gives it a sardonic suggestion, what?' He crushed it into a lump again with his vigorous young square-tipped fingers.

'It's a lot of good my making these silly messes, isn't it? I'd a long sight better chuck the whole show, I suppose. I've more than half a mind to.'

'Do, old man. What's the matter, by the way? Anything special?'

'No. What should be? What are you looking at over there?'

Verney's eyes were resting critically on a clay head on the bookshelf. He had come upon it before, in his search for cigarettes. He picked it up now to inspect it.

Denham watched him, lying back in his chair with his hands in his pockets, a deeper brown in his cheeks, and an immense assumption of nonchalance.

'Think it's like?' he queried after a minute. 'Miss Ilbert, you know.'

'You don't say so. Thanks for telling me. Well, I did divine that much, if you want to know. But no, I don't think it's particularly like. Pass me the clay; I believe I could do a better one myself.' He mused as he worked. 'Yes. There's a straight line about the face, and a sort of clear firmness, that lends itself to the clay rather well. Why didn't you do her better, Johnny? Look at this—the jaw should be squarish—so. You made yours too weak. And you made your nose too sharp—should be more like this. Eyelids drooping over a bit—but yours look as if she was half asleep. She's not like that; she's watching; laughing, too. What do you think of that, now?'

'Not bad,' Denham said critically. 'A bit heavy, though.'

'That's only because I've not got the expression much. How does one get it—that laugh in the eyes? 'Tisn't the eyes, either, so much as the lids. A kind of a gibe. She always looks like that when she meets me; can't think why, I'm sure.' He surveyed the blankness of his handiwork discontentedly, missing therein the unproducible, elusive spirit of whimsical mockery that should have dwelt there.

The outcome of his reflections was: 'I say, Denham, does she laugh at you much? I expect she does.'

'Dunno.' Then, after a pause, 'You know, some asses think she's flippant—frivolous—I don't know what.'

‘Do they?’

‘Yes. Of course one knows why they think so; she does give that impression—laughing at everything, and that sort of thing.’ Johnny was on his feet, moving things on the table with restless fingers. ‘But—well, the asses who think that have never seen her talking about anything she really cares about. She doesn’t laugh then; she’s got a sort of look—well, don’t you know, as if she could see miles further into her subject than anyone else; sort of look as if she’d felt things and understood things and known things, and they all come shining out of her face.’

‘Yes?’ Verney was gently pulling the clay about.

‘She’s been most awfully decent to me,’ went on Johnny. ‘There’s—there’s no earthly reason why she should ever have bothered herself about me at all.’ He was suddenly, jerkily shy, and turned upon Verney a shamefaced eye, seeking assurance that he had not played the fool. Verney gave him and could give him none. It was on his tongue to say, ‘Don’t go and make an ass of yourself—for any sake, don’t.’ Recognising the limits of the rights of friendship, he forbore. If Denham wanted to be a fool—and a certain ring in the jerked-out words had conveyed somehow a folly well set upon the road—well, he must be a fool, and there was an end of it. The question that remained to be answered was whether the lady, too, contemplated similar folly; to what, in fact, the ‘decency’ eulogized by Johnny amounted. In Verney’s conception of her, which, was however, of the slightest, it was a decency not narrow or confined, but flowing out to many objects. To put it crudely, Verney thought it highly prob-

able that she flirted, albeit he admitted that the assumption was without other basis than that he had of late come across several people who manifestly would have wished it to be so. He even could imagine, had his own acquaintance been advanced beyond the merest threshold stage, desiring it to be so himself; that is, vicariously and impersonally, he divined in her a charm. To himself, either because he was a mere acquaintance, or because he did not meet with her approval, her manner, when they had met, had been cool and slightly amused. To others—the young Denhams, for instance—Verney had seen her show a playful, half-teasing affection, careless and imperious, and wholly gracious.

‘Oh, I’d much better drop it, I suppose,’ Denham repeated gloomily, his eyes sombrely on the head, which was still developing in Verney’s hands. ‘She says I’m doing no good here, you know,’ he said, explaining thus his day’s mood for Verney’s elucidation.

‘Miss Ilbert? Does she?’ Verney’s brows implied ‘What has she to do with it?’

‘She says,’ said Johnny, ‘I’d better go back home and chuck the whole thing, and go into glass. My uncle’s glass, you know, and I could have a berth there if I liked.’

‘What does she know about it, though?’

Johnny sighed heavily. ‘I expect her father’s told her I’m not doing much good. Anyhow, she as good as told me yesterday that I was fooling round and making a mess of it, and that I’d a long sight better be grinding at something and earning a living. She may be right; I dunno. Dare say I’m making an ass of myself; and I dare say I ought to be beginning to earn my keep, if I’m going to. One must do something, I suppose,

and if I can't paint I'd better be doing something else. That was her point of view, anyhow.'

'Well, she's a right to her point of view, of course. But you've a right to yours too, after all.'

'Oh, I've not got one; don't know what to think. What do *you* think?' Johnny added gloomily.

Verney looked at him contemplatively for a moment. 'Well, you know, I'm inclined to think I agree with Miss Ilbert that if you do want to go in for doing anything—in the profession line, I mean—it's about time you began to think of it.'

'You advise me to chuck it, then?'

'Oh, I don't do anything of the sort; it's quite your concern. But you say you want to earn a living——'

'Suppose so; eventually.'

'Well, painting's a fairly risky living at the best, isn't it? Can't say I should care to trust to it myself.'

'In fact,' Denham smiled forlornly, 'you think I'm a rotter—as she does.'

'I don't think any such thing. You've not had time to give yourself a chance yet. If you had prospects of unlimited leisure, I should say go on and give yourself a chance. If you haven't—well, honestly, I think it's risky. But I don't want to advise you.'

'Thanks; you have, now.'

'Well, it's your own look out, you know. I wouldn't take anybody's advice if I didn't agree with it. You wouldn't go yet, I suppose, anyhow?'

'Oh, I should stay the winter, I suppose. Tell you what, Ruth, the boring thing is to be footling on, making an ass of one's self.'

'Rot, man; you've got to try what you can do,

of course ; everyone has. There's no question of making an ass of yourself, except when you talk like that.' He divined 'the boring thing is that she should think so,' and knew that his words fell drearily beside the mark.

On his way home he considered the large assumption of rights which was conveyed, startlingly, in this seemingly casual moulding of the lives of other human beings.

'You'd have to believe jolly firmly in your own point of view before you tried it on,' was his conclusion. 'Can't say I should care to myself, except with a chap who's got no sense of his own, like Charlie, say. Then of course it's one's business to see he doesn't make too much of an ass of himself. Miss Ilbert appears to make a universal business of it.'

CHAPTER VII

A QUESTION OF RIGHTS

MISS CECIL ILBERT, leaning over the furthest angle of the Pincian wall, watched Verney Ruth talking to a grey-haired man a few yards off. Turning away, he caught her eye and came towards her.

'But he's got quite a nice smile,' he gave her opportunity to reflect.

The perpetually amused eyes greeted him.

'A gay scene.' She indicated the gardens and the line of carriages with a gesture. 'Do you like it?'

He considered it gravely. 'Immensely. I make a point of always coming here on Sundays. Don't you?'

'Yes. One should always make a point of being *comme il faut* in these ways—classy, don't you know. What did you come for? The people or the view, or the band, perhaps? So nice and loud, isn't it? Are you musical?'

'Very. Well, I might have come for any of those things, or for tea at the casino. As a matter of fact, I came because my tutor brought me.'

'Do you keep a tutor? How nice for you.'

'I don't keep him—I couldn't afford to, I'm afraid. I met him, though. He's in Rome.'

'So it seems. Was it a shock?'

'Well, it was, rather. I supposed he was safe at Oxford. However, here he is, for the time being. He asks how I'm getting on.'

'Very tactless of him. And I suppose one can't snub one's tutor, as one would the ordinary mortal. Trying, certainly.'

'Miss Ilbert,' Verney laughed a little.

'What?' The quizzical eyes noted the slight deepening of colour.

'You appear to think I'm always looking out for an opportunity of being objectionably rude. I don't think I am, you know.'

'No? But I didn't say you were, you know.'

'You have more than once implied it. If ever I have once given you an excuse for doing so, I apologize. It shan't occur again. Does that close the subject?'

They both smiled a little.

'I suppose it should,' she said. 'Well, then, do you admire the view?'

They looked down at the great spread of the city, a rolling sea beneath the pure flame of the western sky; a veritable bewilderment of roofs and domes, among them all few to be sharply distinguished. Only to the west, across the river, a black mass rose against the clear red sky—Castel St. Angelo, with its angel poised against a sea of fire, keeping guard, as it were, over the one tall dome beyond, which stood backed faintly by the blue line of the hills.

'What one may call gaudy,' murmured Rosamund. 'That's why I like it. Ruskin says that a taste for bright colours is the sign of a pure heart. I wish those children were here; they'd like it.'

Surmising her reference was to the young Denhams, Verney took the opportunity to say, 'I hear you've been advising Johnny to go home.'

She turned careless eyes for a moment from the glowing city.

‘Yes; I have.’

His wonder at her large assumption of rights—a wonder touched with irritation—urged him to speech. Denham, after all, was his friend as well as hers, and a friend of a longer standing.

‘Rather unsettling, you know, to be given advice of that sort.’

‘Is it?’ Her tone was careless, almost casual. He wondered, watching the easy pose of her attitude as she leaned over the wall, if she had even heard him. But after a moment she showed him that she had.

‘You don’t agree with me, then?’ she said, not, however, as if it were a matter of much moment.

Verney hesitated.

‘Well, yes, if you come to that. But that isn’t quite the point.’

She looked round at him. ‘Why not?’ The laconic, random carelessness of her questions was apt to be disconcerting.

‘Well—I don’t know’—Verney was a determined person—‘I mean, however much I thought someone was managing things the wrong way, I don’t know that I should go so far as telling him so, myself.’

‘Wouldn’t you? Why?’

‘Because the probabilities are he knows his own mind, whether he knows his business or not, and to have my point of view rubbed into him would only either set him more on his own way—’

‘You’re supposing someone stupider than Johnny, you know.’

There was the hint of a laugh in her voice.

'Or it would simply worry him and unsettle him. And if he took the advice he'd very likely be doing it against his own judgment, which is a fairly fatal thing to do ; and if he didn't, he'd quite probably go on feeling worried and unsettled and not be doing any good. I mean, whatever you do, it had better be something you've chosen for yourself, with your eyes open. If you're only going your own way, and believing in it, it's surprising what an ass you can make of yourself, without its hurting you, to speak of.'

The argumentative vehemence of the characteristically quick, soft tones brought a smile to her eyes.

'I quite agree, you know,' she said. 'I didn't want Johnny to act against his judgment. It would be abominably bad for him. That seems hardly necessary to say, surely. I want to make him judge for himself. He hasn't, so far. He's never thought about it. He began to paint because he thought he'd like to ; he came out here because his mother and sister thought they'd like to, chiefly. He's never, as far as I know, considered the question properly in all its bearings. That's what I want to make him do.'

'Oh ! Well, he's fairly worried now.'

'Good for him. I hoped he would be.'

'Good for him ? Well, I don't know. Not particularly good for his painting, I imagine.'

'No ? He can't paint much, you know. I told him so. He'll never be good enough to make it worth while to give up much for it. It'll end by his simply playing round and doing nothing—horribly bad for him. He'd much better go and make glass. Then there's Maggie.'

'Yes ?' Glancing at her, it seemed to him that

the laughter in her eyes had softened to a different look.

'Well, she's one of the nicest people I know. I'm very fond of her. But she's just the merest baby, of course, and it's no good her thinking she's learning to paint here, because she simply isn't. She's merely getting spoiled. She's so nice, you see, and so clever, and such a child, that everyone combines to spoil her in a place like this. People want playthings, and she's such a nice one. Jane—my cousin—even, who never spoils anyone, spoils her. My father spoils her. I think everyone who knows her does. Well, there you are, you see ; it's awfully nice, of course, but if she really wants to learn to paint, she'd much better set to work at it properly in London. As long as her beloved Johnny stays here, she'll want to, of course ; that's partly why I want him to go. I told him so. I told them both so.'

That she had done that Verney felt no doubt. He, his eyes abstractedly on the firm lines of hand and arm that rested easily on the grey stone of the wall, said nothing. He was thinking it over ; in honesty he was compelled to admit a certain keenness of insight to justify the careless security of her judgments. He knew that what she had said was no more than the truth. Combined with her caring, that insight, he half admitted, might constitute a sort of right. But that granted, other issues rose to complicate the matter. He was irritated, too, by her easy way of taking it.

'You see,' she added after a moment—and there was now no touch of mockery in her quizzical eyes—'I'm rather fond of both of them. And I do want them to make the best of themselves. It's a good best, you know. One must help them in any way one can, surely.' She glanced at

him with a swift rising of laughter in her eyes, as they took in the set and expression of his chin and lips. Her brows rose in whimsical deprecation. 'You don't see the necessity?' she said. 'You think, of course, that I'm horribly interfering. Well—I'm sorry—but there it is, you see!' Her shoulders rose faintly to accompany her brows.

Verney paused a moment.

'No,' he said, 'not that exactly. But I do think, you know, that it may be risky sometimes.' He was thinking of Johnny Denham's stammered 'She's been most awfully decent to me. There's no earthly reason why she should ever have bothered herself about me at all.'

'Risky?' she repeated; then, glancing at his half-averted face, worked out his meaning.

The insight Verney had admitted in her had this advantage—she was not apt to remain at a loss concerning the workings of her neighbours' minds. Her eyes took a new gravity; their weariness became suddenly pronounced; the laughter was blotted from them wholly.

'There are so many risks in life,' she said. 'One is that you may let people make a hash of themselves and their affairs without ever putting out a finger to stop them, when perhaps even the little you could have done might have been some good. Another is, of course, that you may meddle stupidly, and blunder. . . . That may have horrid consequences, of course. . . . But it's one's own idiotcy, and one can only learn by experience, and do it better next time.'

The weariness of her voice, the touch of bitterness in it, somehow made Verney feel as if he had, meaning to prick a little, struck a blow on an open hurt, the existence of which he had not known. He felt disarmed despite himself, and

though he still tenaciously held to his position; such disarming, he felt, was scarcely fair. He steeled himself against it, and resolutely pointed the moral.

'What we learn,' he observed didactically, 'is, I suppose, not to interfere more than is absolutely unavoidable.'

She half turned and glanced at him with something that might have been amused impatience—the hint, as it were, of a sudden laugh suppressed.

'Just so,' she said.

A sudden chiming of bells from a hundred churches came up to them through the still air, announcing Ave Maria.

Rosamund came back to actualities.

'Church? No,' she debated, 'because I've got to go and see someone at half-past four, and it's now five. I hate appointments; I can never keep them.'

Rosamund, coming home a couple of hours later, sank into a chair in the drawing-room with a deep breath of exhaustion.

'Oh, Janey, I'm tired.'

'Are you?'

Jane Gerard looked up, in her usual undisturbed and deliberate way, from her book. She was a muscularly-built young woman, loose-limbed and broad-shouldered. She was a year younger than Rosamund, though she looked rather older. Nature had given her excellent brains, an immense fund of common-sense, a rather fine face, and an overweening sense of the ridiculous. This, combined with a slightly supercilious manner, and a very slow and deliberate way of bringing out her words in a surprisingly deep chest voice, gave to some people an impression of conceit. As a matter of fact, she was inordinately critical

and only a little conceited, and Rosamund and she were very fond of each other.

'You've been doing about a dozen things at once, I suppose, as usual, and seeing about twenty people,' Jane said, scathingly. 'You're really very silly, Rosamund.'

'No; I've only been seeing Kitty Anstruther. I feel the weight of myself. "What is heavier than lead? Is it not a fool?" And the weight of me and Kitty Anstruther together—we all but broke through the drawing-room floor. How disgusting of me! And I've just been eating her cake—such unpleasant cake; it flaked all over the carpet and my Sunday skirt. I wanted currant-bread, but there wasn't any; there never is when one goes out to tea. Why do I go and see Kitty Anstruther, Janey?'

'I can't imagine.'

'Nor can I.'

Rosamund looked thoughtful, and a little despondent.

'What did you talk about to-day?' Jane inquired.

'Usual things. I told her she was a little fool. What else should one talk about to Kitty Anstruther?'

'Oh! And what did she say?'

'I don't know. I didn't listen—I never do, you know. I've long since learnt what she says on these occasions—gist of it being, her husband doesn't understand her, and about seven other men do—I think it came to seven. I spent my time trying to stave off confidences; I couldn't stave them all off, though.' Rosamund paused a moment; her eyes were touched with a faintly-amused disgust. 'Janey, do you know, I'm inclined almost to give the little donkey up as a bad job.'

'I can't think why you didn't long ago.'

Rosamund made a slight, half-weary gesture of the shoulders.

'My usual conceit, I suppose. I flattered myself I was doing some good. When a person professes to be more or less fond of one—however, what's the good of talking? It's a brainless world, and I'm very much bored. . . . Janey, do you know, I'm lying smashed into about a hundred small pieces. I feel like Humpty Dumpty; all the king's horses . . . Put me together and cement me, please, as kindly and tenderly as you possibly can. Tell me I'm the nicest person you know—all the untruths you can think of. Begin.'

'I couldn't possibly tell untruths on Sunday evening. What's been breaking you? Your silly little fool?'

'Partly. . . . I'm a little distressed about Johnny, too.'

She spoke half absently, more to herself than to her cousin. Jane, glancing at her, wondered if she knew a fact about Johnny Denham which was patent to her own eyes. Having some belief in her cousin's intelligence, she concluded that she did; she also was aware that the subject would not be mentioned.

'You know,' said Rosamund, 'he's simply playing round—he's not doing anything—and I wish he'd go and make glass. But one has, you see, to let him so much alone——'

'Oh?' Jane's voice expressed mild surprise.

'Oh, I haven't, I know, but I must. Good for me, I daresay, to have to restrain my meddling propensities for once in a way.'

'I shouldn't wonder,' observed Jane.

'Maggie's good for him,' Rosamund went on. 'Maggie, of course, is a rather fine person; she's

worth two of him for grit. . . . Janey, I remember now why I'm in pieces—I've been broken, cruelly smashed up, by the hammer of a righteously indignant young man.'

'Oh! What was he hammering you for? Had he been proposing to you or anything?'

'No. It may seem to you odd, but I'm afraid nothing can have been further from his thoughts. It would have been splendidly prompt of him if he had, considering we've known each other just a month. It was the man I try to snub, you know—Mr. Ruth. I've done snubbing him now, because I actually induced him to apologize. Then he proceeded to snub me. He's an opinionated person, and his point of view was quite mistaken, as I informed him. But it amused me to listen to him; he was rather dogmatic and very young, and made praiseworthy efforts to combine politeness with severity.'

'What was he severe about?'

'Oh, I don't know. He's fond of Johnny, you see, and he thought my advice to him to go home quite unjustifiable. I didn't gather that he disagreed with it, but just that one shouldn't advise. He himself goes on the "live and let live" tack, he informed me. Well, it's very sensible of him. I said, "Oh, you do, do you? Then have the goodness to let *me* live." So we parted, more in sorrow than in anger. . . . What do people mean by talking of "ought" and "ought not" about things of that sort? It's simply instinct. I don't see that one can any more help trying to pull people through trouble, or drag them out of messes, than one could sit with one's hands before one and listen to someone who was hurt crying for help without putting out a finger to do anything for them. My severe young man says

it's risky. Well, one surely has to take a few risks in life. Of course, there are risks. One may set to work quite the wrong way and blunder horribly, through not knowing the person well enough. Some people, of course, have to be let severely alone, to work out their own salvation. But the ones who are helpable one has to help—if one can—and that's all about it.'

'Did you tell Mr. Ruth so?'

'No; I didn't waste many words on Mr. Verney Ruth. I believe I did tell him more or less what I thought about Johnnie and Maggie, by the way. It probably made him furious, because he's a great friend of theirs. I didn't mind. It might be rather nice, you know, to feel as certain that one's own methods were the best, as Mr. Ruth does. No, he doesn't say so exactly; but I see it in his chin and in his shoulders. One feels if ever he did tumble off his wall it would indeed be a case for all the king's horses and all the king's men. May I be there to see! Snub *me*, indeed! I like his cheek. But it was rather nice of him to apologize about Hilda Derrincourt. He might easily have said, "What business is it of yours?" He didn't, though, and I have some hopes of him in consequence. I detest his aunt, but then that isn't his fault exactly; besides, she's only an aunt by marriage, I suppose.'

'I like him,' said Miss Gerard; 'he's quite amusing. And as for Hilda Derrincourt—well, who wouldn't snub Hilda Derrincourt, if they could? I always try to.'

'Oh, you. If any young man of my acquaintance took upon himself to be half as rude as you are, I should wither him to nothing. . . . Mother, dear, you're exceedingly beautiful to-night—almost ostentatious, don't you know.'

Pretty little Mrs. Cecil Ilbert had rustled in, a dainty compound of grey silk, soft grey hair, old lace, and young delicate colouring. She was on a smaller scale than Rosamund—a woman of the dainty, Dresden china order. She had in all probability been petted as a child by her parents, as a girl by her lover; and now, as a middle-aged woman, her husband and her children spoiled her. 'You've always had much more petting than was good for you, you know,' Rosamund was wont to inform her. Her husband, while making of his daughter a friend and comrade, gave to his wife a delicate, affectionate deference, not staled by the custom of five-and-twenty years.

'Yes, dear. Father and I are going to dinner with the Talbots. Do you like the waist-band? I'm not quite sure about it.'

'I'm not, either. But, yes; I think I do. I'll tell you in a little while whether it grows on me or not. So you're going to dinner with the Talbots, are you? Why didn't they ask me? Snub the little secretary from me, will you, if you come across him, and if you can. What with his coolness and his delightful high spirits—champagne-cup's nothing to him. And give Sir Edward my blessing. Not Lady Talbot, because I *don't* like her. Nor the Misses and Masters Talbot, because I hate them all. Here's father, looking rather beautiful, too, with a touching little rosebud.'

'Yes; becoming, isn't it?'

Mr. Charles Cecil Ilbert was a tall, slim, and graceful person. His face, delicately cut and clever, was very much alive; mockery dwelt at the corners of his lips, whimsical mirth in his quick brows. Straight from him Rosamund had got her amused eyes.

He sighed a little, glancing at the repose of his daughter and niece.

'I feel heavily social, Rosamund.'

'You look it, father.'

'Charming people, the Talbots.'

'Of course they are. And if you behave very nicely, perhaps Lady Talbot will praise your last picture. "So very powerful; the cows, you know, so savage and impressive; and the wild Campagna all round. Yes; I *liked* it." You'll know when that's coming, because her voice always gets deep down into her chest.'

'Rosamund, darling, Lady Talbot has always been so kind to us. And, dear child, I'm afraid you've got a headache.'

'A little one, mother. Don't mind me; Janey shall be kind to me.'

'She's been rather ill-used to-day, you see,' Jane remarked, in her leisurely tones. 'Hearing a few home truths, and it doesn't agree with her.'

'And when I asked Janey to make it up to me by telling me a few things neither home nor true she flatly refused. Mother would do it without a qualm if I asked her, I know. There's no nasty Puritanic prudery about her. But I'm afraid she hasn't time.'

'Yes, dear.' Mrs. Ilbert laid her pretty, ringed hand rather anxiously on her daughter's broad forehead. 'I've time for anything you ask me to do. Have you got eau-de-Cologne?'

'Pints, mother. There's your carriage; go, or you'll be late, as usual.'

'I'm never late, dear. You get that entirely from father, you know.'

'I said, "as usual," because I usually go with you, and you're always late then, aren't you, poor, ill-used little person.'

CHAPTER VIII

THE LAST STRING TO A BOW

VERNEY, coming home to his rooms one evening, almost stumbled in the dim light over a pair of legs extended from his arm-chair. A reminiscent fragrance of excellent tobacco filled the room, and a hand was put out to grasp his arm.

‘Mind where you’re walking to, my dear old boy.’

Verney sat down abruptly on the back of the horse-hair sofa.

‘Father! Why, what in the name of—I say, I’m awfully glad to see you.’

‘You’ve been a precious long time coming in,’ remarked Mr. Ruth. ‘Digging up buried emperors, I suppose, what? Do you keep hard at it? That’s a good boy; work while you work, and—well, you’ll have to play a bit now, you know; show me round the sights and all that. I shall expect you to be an encyclopædia of edifying information—all I never had time to acquire myself, you know, in my strenuous life. Well, look here, why don’t you keep any matches in this precious establishment of yours?’

‘I do. On the top of that picture. Good place, because I can reach them, and most of the men who come to see me can’t. Denham can’t. He’s always lost his, and comes foraging for mine. I’m sorry you couldn’t find them, though.’

'I had to ask for some. Why do you keep only one chair a Christian can sit in, by the way? I appear to be in it; I'm sorry, but it can't be helped.'

'I had to buy that, you know. In this country they don't know the use of a chair. They provided me with nothing I could sit in. I told them so, but they didn't seem to see my point. But look here——'

'All right, you want to know why I've turned up like this, I suppose. Very natural you should, when one comes to think of it. But look here, why do you keep a book like this for a man to read when he comes to see you?' He tapped the work with his eyeglass. Verney grinned.

'Oh, that. It's rather funny, you know, once you get into it. Not funny enough to be worth bringing, really, only Hannah gave it me on my last birthday, and she packed my trunk, so it had to go in.'

'Oh, Hannah. Yes, I see—"Master Verney, from his affectionate nurse." So Hannah's got hold of a new author, has she? It was Mrs. Henry Wood in my day.'

'Oh, she gave me "East Lynne" several birthdays ago. I read it, too. I always read them, you know; Hannah likes to talk them over. Charlie never would read his; I always told him it was beastly rude of him. I have to read mine as well as his, and do the talking for both. But Hannah's literary taste has declined. She used to give me jolly interesting books once—"Coral Island" and "The Dog Crusoe," and all kinds of things. I suppose getting old enfeebles one's taste. But I say, you know, I'm awfully glad you've come—only why didn't you write?'

'Don't know. Thought I'd come instead. I

left England three weeks ago. Since then I've been at Monte Carlo for a bit. A disappointing stay, I'm sorry to say.' He regarded his son thoughtfully through the fragrant cloud. 'And now I've come here to see you.'

'That's first-class,' observed Verney.

'You can put me up for a bit—what?'

'Yes, rather. They've got another room here they can let you have, I know. They're not bad digs, you know—and cheap, too. Rather decent, my landlady. I practise my Italian on her and her family. It seems to upset some of them rather; don't know why it should—weak nerves, I suppose. You must be careful with them; but the old lady herself is as cool as a cucumber, and quite 'cute; gets the hang of what I'm saying almost before I do myself. I'm rather a dab at the game by now, you know; I'll interpret for you.'

'Thanks; you needn't trouble. I was a dab at the game some years before you turned your attention to it. Useful things, languages. I've managed to pick up a good few, one way and another, and I've found a use for most of them.'

'Well, then, you'll be able to help me to buy a sponge-bag. Denham's no good at that at all. I got my present one when I went to Eton, and I supposed sponge-bags lasted for ever, but they don't. This one took all the red off "Ask Mamma" on the journey out, and put it on to my shirts. I say—the servant had brought in lamps and set one on the table, where the light fell full on the elder man's face, showing it to his son's eyes a little thinner than it had been, and paler, with more pronounced lines about eyes and lips. 'You don't look specially fit,' Verney observed.

Meyrick Ruth. turned from the light rather impatiently.

'Oh, I'm all right. I'll tell you what, though, I should be glad of a whisky-and-soda, if you can give me one. By the way, you heard about Charlie, I suppose?'

Verney nodded rather gravely.

'He wrote to me that they'd given him the sack. . . . I'm sorry.'

A vague instinct of reticence closed his lips. He had heard very little of Charlie's latest escapades; he divined some worse folly than idleness, but had no desire to inquire into it. From Charlie he had had an incoherent, self-defensive letter; from his grandfather a curt 'Charlie has been a young fool, wasting his time and money about town with your father, who has encouraged him to be grossly extravagant and to neglect his work. The boy has finally done a thing which I dare say he did not regard as dishonest, but for which he may think himself lucky to get nothing worse than dismissal. Your father has now left England, I hear.'

This account Verney took, as he took all allusions to his father by his grandfather, as coloured beyond all likeness to truth by the bitterness of prejudice. It was not, however, a subject on which he cared to dwell.

'Poor Charlie,' observed Mr. Ruth meditatively, 'is really a bit of an ass. He most pronouncedly does *not* manage his affairs well. He did an exceedingly stupid thing, that's the real truth. He's hardly a man of business—what?'

'No. He should have gone into the army or something,' Verney said carelessly. He was vaguely impatient of the discussion.

Mr. Ruth chuckled. 'Refuge for the incompetent—yes.'

'Well, look here, I'll go and speak about supper and your room, shall I?'

Meyrick Ruth, left alone, let his eyes stray observingly round the room. It was a bare room enough, with the somewhat comfortless bareness that strikes on English eyes at first with a sense of chill inhospitality, but which custom makes supremely lovable, from the bare stone floor (it was dark-red, in hexagons, and shone), to the cloistral chasteness of the white walls, and the plump cherubs who, plunging through festoons of pink roses and blue ribbon, made beautiful the high ceiling. It was not on these things that Meyrick Ruth's rather tired eyes dwelt contentedly; rather to him they were emblems of unrest, of the familiar sojourning upon alien shores that had wearied him. It was rather at the recent and superimposed features of the room that his face relaxed and his brow smoothed; at the dumb-bells lying in a corner, the medley of photographs and pipes on the table at his side, the drawings scattered in littered confusion, the rows of well-filled book-shelves round the walls. He wandered round these last, noting their contents. His own literary taste had a certain discriminating fineness, for which the Ruths were not for the most part remarkable; Meyrick had some time since observed with approval that his son took after himself in this respect.

He selected 'Pride and Prejudice,' and sat down to beguile the time with it till Verney's return. But he did not read much. His thoughts played round his own situation with a mingling of amusement and perplexity. He had a generously developed sense of humour, as his countenance

betrayed ; it had served him as stay and support through many vicissitudes of a chequered career. On the face of it there was little to laugh at in his present situation. Nevertheless, he contemplated the events of the past month or so with a silent chuckle. He was, no doubt, in an exceedingly awkward position ; his affairs, as he put it, were bad, extremely bad. They might look up again shortly ; again, it was conceivable that they might not.

‘If I know Meyrick Ruth,’ his sister-in-law had written once, ‘his independence is a very temporary affair ; the time will come when he will crawl back hungrily for doles from the paternal purse. . . .’

That time had come. Unfortunately, the paternal purse had been tried and found wanting. Even at this eleventh hour, the prodigal, with business-like composure and certainty of refusal, had appealed again for help. Sternly the reply had been flung at him, ‘Clear out of England—out of Europe—and I’ll help you then. You know that. Till then, not a penny.’

It amused the prodigal to reflect how he had tried all three generations in order. The first failing thus, he had appealed to the second. His sister-in-law, who liked him as a person, liked him less as an investment, and said so. His brother, though he did not like him in either capacity, lent him enough to subsist on for some little time, recommending him to make himself scarce. He spent the loan travelling, and gambling at Monte Carlo—an enterprise not profitable up to his expectations. Realizing that the end of his tether was somewhere within view, he bethought himself of his last chance, the third generation, and made a very uncomfortable journey, third-

class, to Rome. The third generation had received him with a pleasant smile, and said; 'Glad to see you as long as you care to stop.' It was a refreshingly unaccustomed welcome; it moved Meyrick to some mirth.

He took stock of the situation, wondering several things. He wondered how much the boy had to live on; how long it would be necessary, or expedient, for him to live on the boy, and whether it would be politic on his part to tell the boy that he was most damnably poor. The answer to the first problem was, after a shrewd look round the room, 'Enough for two.' The second had no answer beyond a shrug, and 'We must see how things turn out.' As to the third, after a moment's debate it occurred to him that in the matter he had very little choice. He could scarcely hope to conceal the state of his affairs, even if he wished to do so. Besides, why should he wish it? He would make it all right when his affairs improved; and they would improve, he would make that clear. In the meanwhile, the boy was indubitably generous; also he was fond of his father's company. 'I'll make myself pleasant, and he'll like it better than living alone,' Meyrick reflected easily. 'We're both of a sociable sort, and we get on together. I like the boy, and I believe he likes me.'

He was not a person given to metaphysical analysis, but it occurred to him that he had not known, till he had met him again to-day, how much he liked the boy. It was not merely at the prospect of a temporary relief from the burdens of life that his spirits rose; he had also before him the prospect of a companionship that suited his taste. He liked a man who could amuse him, who had a head on his shoulders, and a ready

tongue in it. Incidentally, too, he liked a man who met his eyes with a friendly directness, with neither suspicion nor contempt in his own.

'I'm glad,' Meyrick reflected, 'very glad, indeed, that I didn't breed a dunderhead. He's a distinct improvement on our family type; the Denzils are all intelligent, and he's like them. I dare say Agnes would give something to have him, instead of those two big blockheads and that young fool Charles.' He smiled over this reflection for a moment. Then he became thoughtful.

'What would be the very deuce,' he muttered, 'would be if I got Verney into trouble with my father. Serious trouble, I mean. Well, but why should I? He needn't know I'm here at present—I've never observed that Verney's aggressively communicative—and when he does he'll blame me, not the boy. It isn't the boy's fault, anyhow; he couldn't well slam the door in my face and leave me to sit in the street. Besides'—he chuckled a little—'he didn't have a chance; he found me fairly established. Though, I suppose, he needn't go to the length of providing things for me to eat, which he appears to be doing at some length. Well, I hope the old fellow won't badger the boy till he comes to look on me as a nuisance. That would be a bore.'

Meyrick Ruth, being a clever man, had long since been taught the futility of looking more than a little way into the problematical future. He returned, with a shrug, to the relief of his present well-being. A third-class journey from Monte Carlo to Rome is economical in more ways than the most obvious. It serves as a background, against which pleasures comparatively inexpensive and easy of attainment stand out with attractive freshness.

Meyrick Ruth took a cigar from the box at his elbow; the slightly worried lines in his forehead smoothed themselves. He had been uncomfortably shaken up, mentally and physically, during the last few weeks, and a good deal bored. The worried, annoyed look in his blue eyes was dying out now, leaving them merely pleasant, shrewd, and amused. Their expression constituted one of his few likenesses to his son.

Verney returned.

'I've got you a room all right; and, I say, are you awfully tired? Because, if not, I thought we might dine at the club, and do a theatre afterwards, perhaps, if there's anything decent on. But I'm not keen, if you're not. I don't expect you feel up to very much to-night.'

Mr. Ruth rose.

'I always feel up to enjoying myself. If you'll show me my room, I'll go and dress.'

'That'll be ripping, then,' Verney said. 'I say, you know,' he added, leading the way up the steep marble stairs, 'it's simply first-class that you've come. We'll have no end of a sporting time.'

'I believe the boy really is pleased to have me,' Meyrick, with some complacency, reflected as he dressed. 'But I don't like his staircase.'

They went to the club; there they met Denham, who was lounging at the entrance with spirits manifestly at a low ebb. He had met Verney's father at Oxford, and liked him. Verney asked him to dinner and to accompany them to the theatre afterwards, at which his sombre face brightened a little.

- They had a very cheerful dinner. Meyrick Ruth was a person who could, when he chose, be entertaining; his stories flowed unintermit-

tently; they were always to the point, usually funny, and occasionally true. He punctuated them with the infectious chuckle that so strongly resembled Verney's.

Denham's spirits rose to a higher level than any they had touched for some weeks past.

They went to the Nazionale theatre, and came in half-way through the first act. Denham after ten seconds, Verney after a few minutes, perceived that they were sitting just behind the Ilberts. Verney, in fact, was led to this perception by noticing that Denham was looking not straight in front of him, but a little to one side, so that his eyes, without the fact being markedly noticeable, took in Miss Ilbert's profile and the back of her head *en route*. He had also turned rather red.

After the first act Mrs. Ilbert and her daughter turned and spoke to them. Verney introduced his father. For a moment, taking in the easy, gracious friendliness of Rosamund Ilbert's manner, he realized, with a compassionate vividness, the charm of it as affecting Johnny Denham and others. He grasped the inevitability of it, thoughtfully.

Little Mrs. Ilbert moved her lips with silent emphasis at her daughter. Rosamund, after a moment's speculation, surmised, with her usual intelligent penetration, that her mother desired to know whether or not Mr. Ruth had been asked to the At Home they were giving to-morrow evening. Rosamund opined that he had, and was coming. Upon which Mrs. Ilbert, an innately hospitable person, turned to the elder Mr. Ruth and requested that he would give them the pleasure of accompanying his son.

Mr. Ilbert, from his place a few seats away,

turned and met Meyrick Ruth's eyes. His brows rose for a moment involuntarily. Verney, seeing him look at his father, introduced them.

For one instant Mr. Ilbert hesitated. Then :

'I think we've met before,' he said.

His mobile face expressed a pleasant and conventional readiness to renew the acquaintance, as his quick eyes met the shrewd blue ones.

'I believe we have.' Meyrick Ruth returned the look; in his eyes was a just discernible flicker of amusement. 'In San Francisco, a good many years ago—what ?'

A slightly staggered look crossed Mr. Ilbert's face for an instant.

'Yes, some time ago, wasn't it ?' he said, and turned away, the corners of his lips twitching suddenly.

The curtain rose. Young Denham leaned back and rested his eyes again on the straight line of Rosamund Ilbert's shoulders and the curve of her cheek, and his eyes held an added touch of bitterness, because she had addressed scarcely two words to him during the interval. She had, in preference, thrown her speech away on Verney, whom she had known for so short a time, and on his father, whom she did not know at all. Of the play Denham saw little and heard less.

The play was by Gabriele d'Annunzio, and tragedy unrelieved. As such it slightly bored Mr. Ruth, who liked to be amused. He evinced an embarrassing tendency to laugh at the moments of highest emotional intensity. The young and shy who accompanied him were apt to take to heart the angry murmurs of 'Hush !' that his ribaldry occasionally evoked. He jeered now in explosive, irrepressible chuckles, that broke incongruously into the intensity of each dramatic pause.

'For heaven's sake don't do that again!' Verney adjured him. 'You're simply stamping us all.'

'But it really *wasn't* funny, you know,' Miss Ilbert said to them reprovingly, at the end of the act.

'No,' Verney said. 'My father always laughs when he's touched, you see. It's hysteria, I think.'

'I rather like Mr. Ruth's father,' Miss Gerard observed, as they drove home. 'He's got a sense of humour.'

'He and his son both seemed to be quite amused during the last two acts,' Mrs. Ilbert said, kindly puzzled. 'I couldn't quite gather what they were laughing at—could you, Rosamund? I didn't think young Mr. Ruth could be speaking quite seriously when he talked about hysteria. I didn't like to say anything, but really they were quite disturbing.'

'Mr. Ruth's sense of humour,' said Rosamund, 'seems to be rather abnormally developed all round. It seemed to be a little tickled by meeting father. Why was that, father?'

Mr. Ilbert's smile was rather dry.

'I really can't say. I don't know that mine would have been especially tickled in his place. But I seem to remember that he was always fairly alive to the humorous side of life. An amusing person,' he added thoughtfully.

'How did you come to know him?'

'I met him in San Francisco once, when I was travelling with Camogli—sixteen or seventeen years ago it must be, I think. He was running a gaming-house at the time, which, you will at once perceive, is how I came to know him. A clever scoundrel, and quite disreputable. Camogli and I more or less cultivated his acquaintance for

a time, not having much else to amuse us at the moment. I gathered from various sources, himself among them, I believe, that he had emigrated rather from expediency than from choice, having—well, not distinguished himself at home. He's not a gentleman of sensitive pride, I imagine; he hadn't even gone to the trouble of laying aside his own name, which is a rather particularly respectable one. I have wondered sometimes whether my friend Ruth of San Francisco was any connection of this young man here; there was something sometimes in the turn of voice—and his smile—which reminded me. I naturally didn't ask him, under the circumstances. Well, I'm interested to have met him again. I must ask him to dinner, and get Camogli to meet him; Camogli'd like to see him again.'

Little Mrs. Ilbert had listened appalled.

'My dear Charles, what an extraordinary story! But he seemed such a respectable person. And that nice-mannered boy, too. I can hardly believe it.'

'H'm! A nice sort of father to produce, certainly,' Rosamund commented.

'Well,' Jane remarked in her slow, deliberating way, 'I really think he *is* rather nice, you know—much more exciting than most people's fathers.'

'Most distressingly exciting, I should think. Quite shameless, too. He was simply chuckling inside at the funniness of running into father like that.'

'Well,' Jane said, 'if one must be disreputable, one had much better go in for it cheerfully, and not be ashamed of it.'

'But, my dears,' Mrs. Ilbert cried suddenly, 'I asked him for to-morrow evening. Oh, Charles, we can't possibly have him if he's that sort of

person. Yet I don't see that we can put him off, either. Dear me, how very unfortunate !

'Let's hope he is a reformed character, my dear. I should be sorry if you let any communications of mine as to his distant past prejudice you against him. Besides, I told you I liked him.'

'Be thankful, mother, that it wasn't worse. It might have been dinner, you know.'

'I wonder,' said Jane, 'exactly what his son thinks of him. You have to be nice to your father in public, I suppose, whatever he's done. However disreputably Uncle Charles behaved, you'd have to go on being dutiful to him at theatres, I suppose. So one can't tell, really.'

'Yes, one can,' Rosamund asserted. 'His son's fond of him—really likes him. I spotted that at once. Well, he may not object to the sort of thing, of course; he may even be a disreputable young man himself—you never can tell. Did Miss Prendergast tell you he was honest, sober, and respectable, when she wrote about him, father ?'

'Not as far as I can remember. No; I feel sure she only said that he was a friend of hers—oh yes, and clever. His morality is an unknown quantity.'

'I should be quite sorry,' Mrs. Ilbert said, 'to think any harm of young Mr. Ruth; he's been so polite and helpful lately. But one feels after this that anyone may do anything and one wouldn't be surprised. What do you think, Rosamund? You've seen more of him than I have.'

'Oh, I'm never surprised, mother; it's much too much trouble. It would take more than any vagaries on the part of either Mr. Ruth to move my stolid composure. I only know they take after each other in being very disturbing people

to have behind one at a theatre. But next time I meet him I'll ask the young man what he thinks of his father's moral state, and whether he takes after him or not, if you'd like to know, mother.'

'No, dear, I don't think I should do that if I were you. I feel quite sure he wouldn't like it, and he'd probably think us very inquisitive and interfering.'

'Well, it is conceivable that he might, of course.'

CHAPTER IX

LE MONDE OÙ L'ON S'AMUSE

'It is charming, dear lady, to see you again.'

The Marchese Centurio took his teacup with a courteous smile; he hated tea, but when he went to call on Mrs. Donald Ruth he always drank two cups, having perceived that most of her other visitors did so, and coming of a courteous race. This was his first cup, and he sipped it with Spartan impassivity. He had at least the comfort of knowing that it might be worse; it might be sweetened, as he had unwittingly permitted the first time he had partaken of it. But Mrs. Ruth was a friend of his, and for the sake of Mrs. Ruth he tolerated her tea.

Mrs. Ruth had arrived in Rome a few days ago. She always spent the winter abroad when she could, and in Rome often enough to have become an accepted figure in its society. She was looking on this February day more than usually frail and sharply-cut, as she leaned back among the cushions of her deep chair. 'Worn to a thread,' the Marchese reflected; 'she is beginning to look a *vecchia*. What a pity.' He regretted it, because he rather liked her fine, delicately-cut style, her small, thin, white hands, lightly ringed, her pale blue tea-gown that matched the pale blue of her eyes, and set off the fairness of her hair, as yet hardly touched

with grey. But she was so thin, so sallow; she undoubtedly was beginning to look a *vecchia*—as well she might, to be sure, reflected the Marchese, recalling an occasion when he had seen her eldest son, whose stalwart, full-grown manhood had given him something of a shock.

He himself was younger than the lady by a few years; a neatly-made person whose small, dark beard was trimmed to a point, and whose eyes, under expressive, mobile brows, were the colour of ripe chestnuts in the sun. Mrs. Ruth liked him because he was clever, and amused her, and was better than anyone else she knew at giving her Roman gossip.

'It is,' she said, 'an immense relief to be here, away from England.'

She spoke Italian. They always talked Italian together. Mrs. Ruth spoke it fairly well, and her lapses were not revealed to her by so much as a flicker of the brows.

'Ah, you don't like England in winter,' he observed sympathetically.

'I'm not, you know, devotedly attached to England at any time,' she told him. 'Nor do I love my countrymen passionately.'

'You surprise me,' he said politely. 'They're charming, in my opinion.'

She gave a little shrug.

'The most—what do you say—like cows, you know, of all the nations in Europe; our country people, anyhow. I would sooner live among any other people in the world.'

He made a quick gesture of horror.

'God forbid it! There are the Germans whom you've forgotten.'

'Well, yes,' she admitted. 'I did, for a moment, forget those. I confess there are lower levels . . .'

'The cow,' he said, 'is a better beast than the pig. Not,' he added, 'that I for a moment admit your simile, when I know well so many charming English.'

'Tell me who's here this year,' she said. 'And a little more tea?'

He handed his cup with a heroic smile.

'A drop, merely. Ah! you are much too kind.' He received the full cup with a tiny inward sigh. 'There are, I think,' he said, 'several of your friends here. There are Sir Gerald and Lady Anstruther, the little pretty one whom I am deeply in love with—when you aren't on the scenes, you understand. But I'm too old; I'm not in the running. The young men she has to pick up her handkerchiefs one certainly cannot count on the fingers of one's two hands and all one's toes.'

'Tell me; I may as well know who they are, so that I can ask them to meet her at dinner.'

He mentioned a few.

'And then,' he resumed, 'there are the Ilberts, those charming friends of yours. He is a man of great talent, is he not? And Miss Ilbert and I have much conversation. I am proud to say that she numbers me among her friends. She has a large circle, that young lady.'

'Yes. Well, I don't know them much, you know; but I'm glad they're here. They're in the Piazza, too, I suppose, as usual.'

The Marchese had remembered something.

'That reminds me—I met at the Ilberts' conversazione, a few weeks ago, relations of yours.'

'Oh yes. My nephew, I suppose, and my brother-in-law?'

'Yes. I heard their name; I got myself introduced; I made friends with them, delighted to

find they were so near to you. Since then I have seen much of them. A young man of brains, I hear, your nephew. I have talked to him a great deal.'

'Oh, Verney's clever enough,' his aunt admitted; and he detected the grudgingness in the admission. 'His father's the cleverer of the two, though, I imagine. 'What do you think of my brother-in-law?'

Her pale, keen eyes scrutinized his face.

'But—he is a charming fellow,' the Marchese said readily. 'Amusing—witty—clever; most generous and hospitable, too.'

'A little vicarious, his generosity and hospitality,' Mrs. Ruth said, using the English word with an inflection of dryness. 'But I grant you the rest, which is all to his own account. I thought you'd like him. I do, too.'

Her eyes, still scrutinizing his courteous face, caught a slight, involuntary flicker of the mobile brows. It told her what she had been seeking to discover.

'I see,' she said drily, 'that you haven't any illusions on the subject; that you know all about my delightful brother-in-law; isn't it true?'

His eyes were deprecating.

'All about. . . . No, I don't think so, indeed.'

She smiled her small acid smile.

'Oh, of course; we none of us do that. There's too much in Meyrick for that. But you know—well, something about him, we'll say.'

'I know,' said the Marchese, with grave discreetness, 'that he is a very charming person. One needs to know no more.'

She nodded approval.

'Just so. I think you're entirely right, you know. But you mustn't think I am afflicted by

my brother-in-law's vagaries. They merely amuse me, I assure you. And it would interest me to hear who told you about him.'

The deprecation grew.

'It was told me—what little there was to tell—as the merest trifle, and quite in confidence, by a friend of mine, Signor Camogli. I think you know him a little. He had met Mr. Ruth in America; oh, very many years ago. He was travelling there with our friend Mr. Ilbert, and they met Mr. Ruth. Oh, they liked him; I assure you they made friends with him. They thought him, Signor Camogli tells me, a most charming fellow.'

'Of course; they were sure to. So Mr. Ilbert's met him before, too? That is new to me. And I presume he, too, knows all about him.'

'He said nothing to me—nothing. And I met him, you know, at——'

He paused, a trifle confused.

'Yes; I know. So, you mean, he can't have a very low opinion of his morality. But I don't know about that. Mr. Ilbert isn't, I'm sure—well, what we call strait-laced, you know. His disapproval would be tempered always by human kindness and by his liking to be amused, would it not? Oh, but you mustn't look apologetic, Marchese; I assure you the topic doesn't affect me in the least. I've no family pride, you know, and as a matter of fact I like my brother-in-law better than most of his relations put together. After all, the main thing is to be amused, isn't it?'

He bowed, with an answering twinkle in his chestnut-coloured eyes.

'I suppose,' she said, after a moment, 'that he and my nephew have been amusing them-

selves together very successfully lately, haven't they ?

His glance held a touch of surprise at the words or at the faint acidity of the tone.

'Indeed, I should guess so,' he said politely. 'Certainly, they go about ; they are not hermits. Why, yes ; I should say they know how to enjoy life as well as most men.'

'My nephew, you know,' she said, 'is supposed by his friends in England to be immersed in work.'

At that he laughed a very little. But his brows apologized for him.

'Certainly,' he said, 'I don't know that one would say that of him at present. But what would you have ? He is young.'

'And then, naturally, there is his father, who must be entertained,' she said. 'A young man owes it to his father to give him pleasure, does he not ?'

'Surely.'

'It may surprise you to hear, Marchese,' she remarked, after a moment, 'that till my brother-in-law and my nephew came to see me yesterday I hadn't the least idea that my brother-in-law was in Rome.'

'No ?' The Marchese was not markedly astonished. 'But—well, one's relatives—one so often doesn't know ; isn't it so ?'

'Perhaps,' she said, with her little dry smile. 'Anyhow, my nephew hadn't thought it necessary to mention his father's visit in his letters home to his grandfather or anyone else.'

'Indeed ! But one doesn't always tell even one's grandfather everything ; not even always'—he smiled at her apologetically—'the most charming of aunts.'

'No; and in this case there are excellent reasons for being discreet. My good father-in-law, you see, is desperately afraid that his son will corrupt his grandson, who is to have the property. He'll be furious when he hears they're together.' The situation always appealed to Mrs. Ruth's sense of the ridiculous. She enjoyed describing it for the amusement of other people.

The Marchese laughed softly. 'A unique situation,' he commented. His other comment was strictly to himself. 'Oh, he's to have the property, is he?' His thought flashed for a moment over that stalwart young soldier, whose assertive manhood had once given him a slight shock. He was a clever person, and in that moment he saw several things. Situations, to the Italian mind, have a knack of reducing themselves to terms of the clearest, most concrete simplicity. Where the Teuton perhaps sees hazily, through the confusing mists of sentiment, the Latin will set the thing down promptly, in terms of hard fact. The Marchese did so now. He was not quite right. He did not allow enough for his sharp-tongued friend's love of mischief for its own sake, and her enjoyment of awkward situations. But the affair at once acquired an interest to his practical mind.

'It is the large grave husband who has sent her here,' he told himself. His acquaintance with Donald Ruth was superficial.

It happened that, as he went downstairs, he met Verney Ruth coming up. He looked at him with a new interest, and asked him and his father to dinner.

'But I think he will ruin himself, that young man, for I don't think he is of those who adapt themselves,' he reflected, as he passed on. 'One

can tell it by his eyebrows. He will think he will manage his own affairs, and he will be left, the young fool, with no affairs to manage. Yes; I back the lady aunt. But it is a pity,' he added, 'that she is getting to look such a *vecchia*.'

'Why didn't you bring your father with you, Verney?' Mrs. Ruth was meanwhile inquiring.

'I don't know. He went off somewhere; said he wanted to look at pictures or something. May I have some tea, or has Centurio drunk it all?'

He sat down in the rather fragile chair that the Marchese's neat little figure had just fitted. Under his weight and length of limb it creaked uneasily, and Mrs. Ruth's forehead puckered a little. The Ruths were built on such a superfluously large scale, she reflected, with a touch of irritation. She preferred small-made men, though if her nephew had so far departed from his family traditions as to be small, she would have been vaguely and unaccountably annoyed with him; just as, though she esteemed it all important that a man should not lack conversation, that Verney did not sting her with a secret irritation.

'Well,' she said, in her not unpleasingly resonant and metallic voice, that always clipped off her final *g*'s, 'I was hopin' you'd look in, though I didn't suppose you would.'

'I wanted tea,' Verney explained, helping himself to tea-cake, 'and to see you,' he added politely.

'I've just been havin' Centurio here,' she said.

'Yes, I met him. Rather a game, isn't he? He's rather taken with us, you know; he's asked us to dinner again to-night,' said Verney, with some complacency.

‘Oh, that’s because you’re my relations, you know. He’s a great friend of mine. Do you know Signor Camogli, too, by the way?’

‘Yes, more or less.’

‘He knew your father in America, Centurio was sayin’.’ She looked at Verney to see how he liked the idea of this previous acquaintanceship. To observe how her nephew took his father was an occupation of unceasing interest and entertainment to her. Her curiosity on the subject had never been at all satisfied as yet. Verney was stolidly eating cake.

‘So my father told me,’ he said.

‘Mr. Ilbert knew him too, didn’t he?’ she said, trying again.

‘I believe so,’ he said amiably, and she realized that there was small amusement to be wrung out of that topic. There was neither wince nor frown nor heightened colour to indicate restiveness.

‘He certainly isn’t sensitive,’ she reflected, with a little yawn. ‘Well, he’s like his father in that.’

‘Your grandfather will be awfully interested,’ she said presently, ‘to hear that I’ve met you.’

Verney sighed a little inwardly. He had supposed that his aunt would mention that fact in her letters. ‘Though what’s the use of boring people with what they don’t like, but can’t alter, is more than I can see,’ he reflected. He himself, with more acumen than excess of candour, had discreetly avoided making mention of his father’s visit in his letters to Abbots Verney, having no desire to receive letters that would certainly be bad to read and worse to answer, and, as he considerably put it, not wishing his grandfather to be worried. However, with the

advent of his aunt, that convenient secrecy was obviously to come to an end. If it was any satisfaction to her, she perceived that his face, at her words, had clouded a little.

'I must write to him sometime soon,' he said, 'and tell him about my father's visit. He'll be interested to hear.'

She looked at him with a little malicious amusement. His attempt at bravado was praiseworthy. He reminded her at the moment of a child caught in a scrape, who, seeing his game up, replies to his companion's 'I shall tell of you,' with a would-be nonchalant 'I'm just going to tell of myself, thanks.' There was also implied, 'And I've no intention of discussing the subject with you.'

'Well,' she said, deeming it wiser to accept this, 'I wanted to consult you about whom to have to dinner next week, besides your father and you. I thought, as you both know the Ilberts, I might ask them?'

'You might,' he returned, without enthusiasm. He had not detected in the Ilberts any burning desire to become better acquainted with his father. Mrs. Ilbert's manner had, he thought, since that night at the theatre, two months ago, been slightly restrained. The only one of the family who had shown marked friendliness lately was the lad Bill, a long-legged, delicate youth of twenty, who was spending the Lent term away from the fogs of Oxford, and who had made friends with the Ruths at the English club, where Meyrick, in particular, spent much of his time.

If the Ilberts did not want to be on friendly terms with his father and himself, Verney told himself, a little huffily, there was, of course, no earthly reason why they should. Only he did not see, in that case, that they had been called

upon to be so cordial at the theatre that night. Miss Ilbert, in particular, he remembered, had talked quite a lot to both of them, with the friendliness she had shown to him in those earlier days, a friendliness that dated, if he had known it, from that Sunday afternoon on the Pincio. He was not at all sure that he approved altogether of Miss Ilbert, and he still a little resented the condition to which she had, though it might have been inevitable, reduced his friend Denham; but personally he liked her. He was more attracted than he perhaps himself knew by her face, her quizzical, comprehending eyes, the random, wayward humour of her conversation, the careless, easy graciousness of her manner. He half-consciously resented the fact that this last had of late been replaced, when they had met, by a courtesy conventional and slightly aloof, which had insensibly removed him again to the distance at which he had stood at their first acquaintance. She never laughed at him now, and unconsciously he missed the easy, whimsical mockery. He knew, of course, that Mr. Ilbert had been slightly acquainted with his father at one time, and presumed that he had not liked him, and had told his family so. Well, of course, thought Verney irritably, if they were of those who never cease to bring up a man's past deeds against him, who cannot take a man as they see him, but must needs pry into his private concerns and discover whether or not he has ever broken a commandment—well, Verney supposed, remembering his own carefully-adhered-to principle, that they had every right to their point of view. He had an inclination, however, which was not logically connected with this principle, to enter into hot and vehement argument with the world in general

on the subject of its unreasonable narrowness. He put the case to himself, as he would have liked to state it to an opponent in argument, with a vehemence and an unanswerable clearness almost superfluous, considering that there was no opponent to be convinced. An impartial reader of his thoughts might almost have considered that he protested too much, and have been reminded of a camp whose physical and natural merits as a place of vantage are not markedly great, and which is therefore entrenched with many entrenchments.

'The Ilberts, then,' Mrs. Ruth said, and wrote it down in an ivory-bound note-book. 'And how about Signor Camogli, and Centurio? Yes, I think we'll have them, too.'

A smile touched the corners of her lips as she reflected that she was at all events honest in asking no one to sit down with her brother-in-law who had not some inkling of his antecedents. There need be no illusions at her dinner-party. She looked forward with anticipatory pleasure to seeing Meyrick, whose sublime unconsciousness and good-humour she immensely liked, entertaining, with his undeniable talent for conversation, a tableful of people who knew, so to speak, all about him.

CHAPTER X

A MÉNAGE À DEUX

‘AN evening,’ was Mr. Cecil Ilbert’s comment afterwards, on Mrs. Ruth’s dinner-party, ‘not devoid of elements of comedy.’

He addressed himself to his daughter Rosamund, who stood warming her hands thoughtfully at the drawing-room stove.

She nodded.

‘With a little tragedy thrown in,’ she murmured, half to herself.

‘There certainly was that,’ said Miss Gerard; ‘General Wilmot took me in. Why do they allow old generals loose about the place, I wonder? Now, if I had had Mr. Ruth *père*, I should have been quite amused. I feel sure he was wasted on Aunt Elsie.’

‘Well, after what your uncle Charles said about him,’ Mrs. Ilbert murmured, ‘I certainly did feel a little upset at being next him. But I must confess that he amused me.’

‘Yes, mother, I saw you chuckling in the most shameless way. I wondered what had happened to your moral sense, usually so pronounced. Now Mr. Ruth *fils* on the other hand did *not* amuse me to-night. In fact, he bored me to sobs. He was morose, to put it baldly. I was disappointed, because he usually has his wits about him. Such was his abstraction to-night that he

sprinkled pepper over his trifle. I asked him if he liked it like that, and he said he did, which was merely a lie, and a very crude and badly done one at that. However, he ate it, I will say that for him; though as a matter of fact I should have respected him more if he had left it like a man, and owned to his mistake. He's eaten up with foolish pride, that young man.'

'But where did the tragedy come in?' Jane inquired. 'Was it the pepper on the trifle, or was there anything else?'

'Partly the pepper. He ate it, you see, down to the bitter end.'

Rosamund paused thoughtfully.

'I was amused by old Wilmot's recognition of Mr. Ruth,' Mr. Ilbert said. 'Did you notice it? First he merely remembered that he knew his face; then it dawned upon him how he came to know it, and he put out his hand eagerly, and said, "'Pon my soul! Weren't you in my old company once?" as pleased as Punch. Then, the next moment, too late to draw back, he obviously remembered some further details; grew brick-red all over his face, stammered, and took his hand away as quickly as he could—still all on impulse, of course—and then he looked uneasily at his hostess, hoping she hadn't noticed anything, and plunged into a very embarrassed and awkward conversation with Ruth about something quite impersonal—not his old company at all. I never saw the poor old fellow so embarrassed; and Ruth all the time was as cool as a cucumber. I get to like that man more and more. He grows on one. But obviously he didn't precisely do himself credit when he was in the army. I should think they turned him out as expeditiously as they could. But was that little scene your

tragedy, Rosamund? I perceived it wasn't lost on you.'

'No; it wasn't lost on me. Nor on Mr. Ruth *fil's*, who was standing close by me at the moment.'

'Do you think he minded?' Jane asked.

'Wouldn't anyone mind?'

Rosamund said no more. She had had at the time a feeling almost of having spied, because she had happened to glance at Verney Ruth's face, and seen it tinged suddenly with a faint colour; seen, too, a little pulse quiver for a moment in his cheek. Then she had looked away. She herself had kept up a serene flow of conversation at dinner in spite of what she termed the moroseness of her neighbour, though it was not, as a general rule, her desire to make things easy for morose young men. She had felt suddenly sorry for Verney Ruth; the incident, and that glance at his face, had shed a little light on a situation which she did not as yet more than half understand. She was getting to understand a little more, watching with a grave comprehension in her mirthful eyes.

Mrs. Ruth shed a little more light the next day, when Rosamund came to see her with a book she had promised to lend her.

'An awfully amusin' fellow,' she said of her brother-in-law, 'but very erratic, you know. Keeps his family on tenterhooks. Verney isn't supposed to see anythin' of his father really; his grandfather can't bear it. But Verney takes his own line; he won't hear of bein' ordered about. Oh, must you go? You'll stop for tea, won't you?'

No, Rosamund was sorry she could not stop for tea.

'He seems to be an obstinate person, this

Verney,' she remarked thoughtfully to Jane afterwards.

Jane chuckled a little.

'Of all weird situations!'

'And Mrs. Donald Ruth I *don't* like,' Rosamund said. 'If I'd stopped much longer she'd have told me all kinds of things I should have had no right to hear. Fretful, self-centred little animal! By the way, do you know if Bill's in?'

'He's not. He said he'd promised to do something or other with the Ruths—as usual.'

'H'm! He appears to be rather taken with the Ruths. He and they and Johnny Denham are always about together. Nice lot of work Bill must be doing.'

'Maggie says Johnny never does any at all now.'

Rosamund shrugged her shoulders slightly.

'What do you expect? He's between two stages, you see. It's rather inevitable. And, of course, he's in a mood when he'll play round with anyone who'll play round with him. Quite bad for him, of course. Bad for Bill, too; and, I should think, pretty bad for the young Ruth. In fact, they're three foolish little boys.'

'Have you told them so yet?' Jane inquired.

'No; that pleasure still awaits them. Oh, I've mentioned the fact to Bill once or twice, but such is his infatuation for his precious Ruths, and for his little club in general, that my words of wisdom are lost upon him. The other two, I fear, would fling them back with rage in my face. I should rather like to see Mr. Ruth *fil*s under the circumstances. The set of his shoulders would become so very pronounced. I shall feel impelled to tell him a few home-truths some day, merely for the amusement of the thing. He'd

take it with a nasty sardonic sneer, I expect, and that little politely sceptical laugh he's so addicted to, and then proceed to turn my lecture on to myself, with intent to crush. I should warn him when he began that he might as well spare his words, because he would find it a harder job than he thought for. At least, I may take credit to myself for one thing—I am not sensitive. A good thick skin is a great possession in life. People who want to be disagreeable have no handle. One just thinks, "Very distressing for you having to be so cross and unpleasant," and offers them a cooling dose. Then they see it's no good, and calm down, and next time they feel tempted to make themselves disagreeable they remember that they can't bring it off, and refrain.'

'So that you can have all the disagreeableness to yourself, I suppose.'

'Exactly so. That's why it's such a good arrangement, you see. I can hurl insults at them, and they can't retaliate because they know I don't care in the least.'

It was about a week after this that Verney, coming down to breakfast—breakfast in these days was a late feast—found his father perusing a letter, with his forehead wrinkled in half-humorous dismay. He looked up with a depressed 'Good-morning,' and pointed to another letter by his son's plate.

Verney glanced at the envelope, then poured himself out a cup of coffee, and drank it with the air of a man fortifying himself.

Meyrick chuckled a little.

'Try a roll too,' he suggested.

But Verney shook his head. He had not the air of a man who desires a roll. He sat down at the table and took his letter, weighed it in his

fingers for a moment or two, as if to divine the gravity of the contents, and slowly opened it.

His father watched his face as he ran his eye rather hastily over the double sheet of thin foreign paper, written over in the hand that was still strong and upright, albeit it shook a little with years.

Verney folded up the letter with thoughtful deliberation, and, looking up, met his father's eye.

'Well?' said Meyrick. His eyes, despite their perplexity, twinkled a little. The comedy of the situation came over him, for all his anxiety. 'Well, and what's yours?'

'Mine,' said Verney thoughtfully, 'is—well—fairly explicit.'

Meyrick put out his hand.

'May I see?'

Verney hastily reviewed the letter in his mind.

'Well, do you know, I really think you'd better not,' he said, with a touch of amusement in his deprecation. 'I don't suppose you were exactly meant to, you see.'

'On the contrary, my good boy, I should think I exactly was,' Meyrick said drily. 'However, have it your own way. I dare say it doesn't differ appreciably in wording from mine. Well, you know, Verney, this is a little awkward—what?'

Verney nodded.

'The deuce of it is,' he observed, with a considering frown, 'that we—I—didn't mention anything about it till Aunt Agnes wrote and told him. I wrote the other day, but he seems, when he sent this, to have got her letter and not mine, which is awkward. I was an ass not to get in a letter first, that's the fact. It would have looked better, you know.'

'You think honesty's the best policy on these occasions?'

'To a certain extent,' Verney said. 'Not altogether. There'd have been no point in my writing two months ago; it would only have meant that all this business would have begun two months before it need.'

'Two months? Yes, I suppose it is two months, isn't it? Well, I suppose now I'd better clear out—what?'

Verney said curtly:

'Of course you mustn't! It's all right; I'll write a tactful letter and bring him round.'

'You can always do that, I suppose?' His father looked at him quizzically.

Verney was looking at his plate. He drew his line in a quite definite place. Joking with his father on the subject of his grandfather came outside it. It was one of those points about his son which always made Meyrick Ruth feel as if he had suddenly run up against an unexpected and uncomprehended wall, from which he retired with a shrug.

'I don't think,' he said now, more seriously, 'that you're specially likely to succeed in doing that. And the fact is, Verney, my staying here much longer will get you into trouble. I must clear out. But, to tell you the honest truth, just at present I can't afford it. In a few weeks I may be able, but now I can't. I don't know where I am—how I stand. I hope to hear from my agent in Carolina that my affairs are looking up before long. Or I may hear that they've gone to smash hopelessly. In either case I shall know where I stand, so to speak, and shall be able to make my plans accordingly. It's highly likely I may have to go back to the States again. But if you can go

on putting me up a little longer—well, it would be a capital thing for me, of course. But it's simply a question of how you feel about it. If you think it's risky, and a thing you'd rather not go in for, I shan't blame you ; I shall say you're perfectly right. You've only to say the word, and I'll clear out of Rome and go and pitch camp somewhere else.'

He looked at his son keenly. He had stated the case in a tone that made it purely a matter of business. To one merit Meyrick Ruth at least could lay claim: he only rarely traded on sentiment in his dealings with men, whether kin or otherwise. It was a method of business to which he was occasionally compelled to have recourse, but it was always an unwelcome last resort to him. He did not at all desire to leave Rome, or the shelter of his son's roof, but he made the proposition as if it were a policy the wisdom of which it was incumbent on Verney to consider.

Verney was munching a roll stolidly.

'You can't do that, you know,' he said. 'We've got something on three nights next week, and it would be awkward for me having to turn up alone and say you'd gone.' He met his father's scrutinizing eyes with his abrupt, rather attractive smile. 'The longer you stay, the better for me, you know,' he said. 'Oh, we shall both get letters, of course ; but—well, he knows already what I mean to do about it ; we thrashed the thing out a year and a half ago, and agreed to differ, and there's no more to be said. I'm sorry we can't come to terms about it, but it'll blow over, after all. I shall write to him once, and put the case more or less reasonably ; then I shall let it alone, and he'll forget about it, I dare say.'

Meyrick mentally observed that his son was

rather sanguine. Watching the determined set of his under-lip, and the argumentative light in his eyes, as he turned to the writing-table, slowly perusing his letter for the second time, he wondered, with a suppressed chuckle, what would be the precise wording of the 'reasonable putting of the case.'

Whatever it was, it seemed to take some time. Verney had a facile pen, and as a rule made short work of his correspondence, but this required three separate attempts before it met with his approval. He tore up the first two with a frown, stared at the cherubs on the ceiling, gnawed his pen, and carefully evolved a third, which he wrote with slow precision. When it was completed he read it through with his head at an angle of critical complacency. He had apparently, whether he had put the case reasonably or not, put it to his own satisfaction.

'Good, is it?' said Meyrick from the other side of the room; and Verney, absorbed in the contemplation of his handiwork, started a little.

Meyrick chuckled.

'All I can say is, it ought to be,' he remarked, 'considering the time it's taken you, and the amount of penholder you've swallowed. One mayn't see it, I suppose?'

'No,' said Verney with hasty decisiveness, putting it into an envelope. 'By the way, shall you write?'

'No,' Mr. Ruth replied, imitating his son's prompt emphasis; 'I've nothing to say. Besides, I'm sure you've put the case reasonably enough for both of us.'

At the phrase, which had caught his fancy, he fell to chuckling again.

Colonel Ruth, opening the carefully-composed

epistle at breakfast three days later, read it through with tightening lips and darkening colour. Charlie, who watched him (he was alone with his grandfather for the present, and excessively bored, and perfectly conscious that his position for the time being was that of a child in disgrace), wondered what on earth Verney had been up to now. He hoped for a little interesting news to enliven the tedium of existence. Here he was disappointed; the only sop thrown to his curiosity was an angry crumpling-up of paper, that dark flush, and a half-heard mutter of 'Young coxcomb!'

It was probably, Charlie decided, nothing exciting. It had always been very easy for Verney to make his grandfather angry. Charlie suppressed a yawn, and wished he had gone with his mother to Rome. It was poor sport, this hanging round looking for a job.

Colonel Ruth's appetite—in these days an uncertain quantity—had abruptly deserted him. He got up hastily and went into the garden, still with that crumpled ball clenched angrily between his fingers. His white brows were drawn together over his fierce old blue eyes, so like in colour, so different in expression, to his eldest son's.

'Young coxcomb!' he repeated angrily. "'Sorry that he and I can't agree about this point," is he? He'll be sorrier before he's done; he'll be most damnably sorry if he doesn't look out! I shall write and tell him so. And Agnes says they're amusing themselves very well.' That phrase from his daughter-in-law's letter had bitten like iron into his heart; he caught at all manner of comprised meanings in it. 'She's probably making the thing as mild as she can to spare me,' he had concluded, with a hot rush of bitterly wounded

pride, and that lack of nice appreciation of temperament which, Miss Prendergast had once declared, made of Francis Ruth a stupid man.

Verney received his answer to that letter alone. He opened it with distaste, read it hastily, frowned, and said 'Damn!' beneath his breath. The little servant bringing in lamps watched him with compassion.

'Poveretto! Un affare di cuore che non va bene, ne?' she observed, inwardly.

Verney gloomed darkly, staring out of the window beneath frowning brows.

'I loathe rows,' he said to himself. 'This is going to be perfectly beastly; and what's the good of it all? I wish Aunt Agnes hadn't come shoving her oar in. I could have kept it dark all right for the present. Of course, when he did find out, it would have been fairly bad; but I shouldn't have minded that so much. What I can't stick is being told all the time to do something I don't mean to do. Suppose I shall have to compose another tactful letter; my last doesn't seem to have quite come off. I've a jolly good mind to ignore the whole business when I write, and make myself pleasant on other subjects. I don't seem able to handle this one without offence. I suppose I'd better apologize, though, and say I didn't mean to be offensive in my last. Well'—he sighed heavily, and the little servant with the lamps echoed him sympathetically—'it's a weird sort of situation, but I can't say it appeals to my sense of humour just now.'

CHAPTER XI

THE ART OF KNOWING WHERE TO STOP

THAT the situation did not appeal with any force to Verney's sense of humour, and did to his father's, was one of the subtle indications of the existence of that wall which the one recognised with good-humoured non-comprehension when he ran his head against it, and which the other on principle ignored, but which was, nevertheless, and had always been, existent. It might, perhaps, be taken as another indication of it that Verney, in these days, was in a rather bad temper; Meyrick, on the other hand, was sublimely good-humoured. Meyrick, in truth, was finding the world amusing. He enjoyed Rome from many points of view, even taking an interest, somewhat random and intermittent, in Verney's archæological work, displaying an occasional acuteness in his remarks that made his son look at him in appreciative surprise. Verney's acquaintances all became his; a little coterie formed itself, which included young Denham and Bill Ilbert, as well as the Marchese Centurio and that Signor Camogli who had known Mr. Ruth in Chicago, and seemed nothing loth to pursue the acquaintance. Only those who knew Camogli exceedingly well—Centurio, for example—could have detected in his manner that shade

which implied rather the absence of some customary element in friendship than the presence of any positive feeling otherwise than respectful.

Mr. Ruth, in fact, found no lack of companionship. He and his son and their friends met at the club in the Piazza del Popolo, went to theatres and cafés together, and dined at each other's houses, almost daily.

'D'you like Mr. Ruth?' Maggie Denham, one day after the Ruths had dined with them, inquired of Rosamund Ilbert.

She was, as usual, sitting on a footstool, hugging her knees, and looking up at Rosamund with an owl-like thoughtfulness in her bright dark eyes.

Rosamund, also characteristically, was reposing in a deep chair and doing nothing.

'Which Mr. Ruth—*père*?' she questioned idly. 'I don't know the gentleman much, you know. But I hear he's very good company. You don't like him, I suppose?'

Maggie shook her head.

'Not much. Johnny does.'

'Yes, I suppose Johnny does.'

Maggie wrinkled her forehead a little.

'I don't know why I don't, quite. He's very pleasant, and really very funny sometimes. He tells awfully nice stories. And he's very good to Johnny. But—well, I don't really think he's very refined, deep down, you know. I don't feel, somehow, as if he'd mind taking an advantage of anyone he knew. I suppose it's horrid to say things like that, when I don't know anything about him really; but—well, fathers and sons ought to be about equally nice, I think, and I don't feel as if these were.'

'No. Why should they be? I don't see any

reason why fathers and sons should be equally nice; in fact, it would be rather odd if they were.'

Maggie pondered a further question.

'Verney's fond of his father,' she said at length; 'so I think he must be really nice after all.'

'Which must?'

'Why, old Mr. Ruth.'

'Oh! I should have thought that was rather in young Mr. Ruth's favour myself. As a matter of fact, it's no sign that anybody's nice; it's simply human nature. After all, one's usually more or less attached to one's father, even if he isn't an Admirable Crichton. Which,' she added, with a whimsical glance at Maggie's face, as if questioning how much she divined—'which let us hope Mr. Ruth *père* is. Anyhow, our respective brothers appear to think so.'

'But boys,' observed Maggie, with some scorn, 'never know anything about anybody.'

'No,' Rosamund agreed. 'That's why they've been given—some of them—baby sisters to supply them with information. Do you think if Mr. Verney Ruth had a baby sister he'd take its advice? Poor baby sister; I should be sorry to see it try.'

Mrs. Donald Ruth wondered, cynically, how much straining her nephew's purse was, as she expressed it, built to stand. Regarding her own, she was good-humoured but firm. Against this firmness her brother-in-law flung an occasional appeal, also with perfect good-humour, and took the foreseen reply with, 'I'm sorry you won't, because it comes a little hard on Verney.' Mrs. Ruth, looking at her nephew shrewdly, speculated as to whether he would have endorsed this admission or not. From that quarter she obtained no satisfaction. She saw Verney seldom;

when she did, it was to be irritated afresh by the granite-like stolidity which seemed to be making just now more of a Ruth of him than he had ever been before. She caught on occasion a certain stubbornness in his eyes, but as to the meaning of it she was not quite clear. It might be the indication of the wall set up against his grandfather's batteries, it might be to resist her own probably divined curiosity, or it might mean something else. As to the workings of his mind she had no clue, and dismissed the subject with a yawn.

'Meyrick,' she told herself, 'isn't behavin' with his usual common-sense. In fact, he's playin' the fool. I wonder how long he'll go on with it.'

In the meantime she enjoyed having her entertaining brother-in-law to her dinner-parties (though these, she realized, must be selected with a certain discretion), and liked playing chess with him when he came to tea. Verney seldom now went to tea anywhere. There seemed, of late, to have entered into his attitude towards his acquaintances a certain indefinable aloofness. Others, besides Mrs. Ruth, might have observed a touch of something akin to stubbornness in his eyes. Rosamund Ilbert observed it. She met him once—a rare occurrence now—in the little cloister-garden of the Lateran. She was waiting there by the stone well, where springing water sounds perpetually, in the middle of the little palm-grown garden, when Verney sauntered in, and stood for a minute watching the Western sun strike the little twisted columns to a glad glory of gold, till their bright mosaic shone like a crust of vividly-hued jewels, giving to the cool circle of the cloisters a radiant brilliance hardly monastic.

Then his eyes fell on Rosamund. It was as if an indefinable stiffness suddenly, perceptibly altered his bearing.

Their meeting was merely conventionally courteous; neither smiled. In the moment during which they stood facing each other Verney took in a Rosamund somehow new to him — uninterested, aloof, with eyes as nearly grave as they ever found it possible to be.

'It's rather a nice place, isn't it?' Rosamund observed, passing her fingers gently over the deep scars that the dragging rope had cut in the water-drawing of a thousand years in the grey stone lip of the well.

'Yes,' he said, his eyes resting abstractedly on the inscription that ran, shining brokenly gold in the sunshine, round above the little arches, admonishing those who read to fashion their lives and souls upon these cloisters, so should they be well ordered, fair, and bright.

'A singularly futile admonition, don't you think?' Rosamund said. 'Imagine setting to work to model yourself upon this place, if you weren't built so at the beginning. One knows, of course, a few people who are, and they're very adorable; but for the rest!'

'I would rather try to model myself upon something else — the Baths of Caracalla, for instance,' Verney said, vaguely idiotic.

'Mere size—I see. One might try St. Peter's, of course. I know one or two people who, I think, must have kept the Catacombs in their mind's eye as they moulded their characters. Not very successfully, however. I suppose those things never are, are they?'

It was odd that Verney felt vaguely kept at a distance, in spite of the light, easy tone. There

was a certain conventional aloofness in it. He missed, without knowing it, the whimsical mirth of the eyes that were carelessly following the random figures as they traced the line of the rope-scars. More than ever it was borne upon him that he came under the category of very distant acquaintances, not markedly liked. The stubbornness deepened in his eyes.

'Are you stopping in Rome much longer?' Miss Ilbert asked, politely uninterested.

'I don't think I am going away.'

'Aren't you?' she said carelessly. 'Why not? Everybody does. We're not stopping beyond the middle of May, I expect. Bill,' she added, 'its going back to Oxford next week. There is father—unpunctual person!'

Mr. Ilbert came out of the church towards them, greeting Verney with a quick nod. Then Verney left them.

Rosamund followed the square-shouldered back with her half-amused, very scrutinizing eyes.

'He certainly,' she murmured, 'isn't very like a cloister just now; in fact, he's in a rather nasty temper.'

Verney, walking rather abstractedly down the great dim aisle of San Giovanni and out into the sunlit piazza, speculated, with a certain resentment, on the attitude of the Ilbert family towards the intimacy that had certainly of late been very pronounced between the youth Bill and his father and himself. Bill Ilbert might certainly have been said to have been wasting his time—that is, he ought to have been working, and he had not been working. Certainly, also, he had bestowed much of his company upon the Ruths. Verney admitted, looking back, that his father had not at all discouraged this, and had, in

fact, been perhaps superfluously hospitable to him. He was an agreeable boy, with plenty of the conversation that no Ilbert lacked. Verney had sometimes wished, resenting what he divined to be the Ilbert attitude towards the matter, that the intimacy had been less. But there it was, and the Ilberts, he told himself half-sullenly, had no business to take exception to it. If Bill did not waste his time in one way, he would in another; and as to the rest—well, if they chose to think his father not good enough company—in short, Verney had been over this ground many times before. Looking up, he saw his father coming up the street towards him, distinguishable at once by his well-dressed, leisurely, imperturbable English ease. Something of cool freshness in his get-up to-day reminded Verney of the approach of summer. It is possible that a faint touch of irony lurked in the pleasantness of his eyes as he looked—a touch that would, perhaps, have been absent two months ago. If so, no trace of it lingered when their eyes met, and both smiled.

‘A nice afternoon, isn’t it,’ Meyrick said. ‘I’ll turn back with you.’

He offered his cigar-case. Verney, who had yesterday provided the money to purchase the cigars, took one, and for a little while they walked and smoked in silence beneath the aspens along Via San Gregorio.

Meyrick stopped and waved his cigar in front of him towards the Arch of Constantine, which stood, a triumphal entry, at the end of the straight road.

‘Good effect that. Mauve sky through the arch, Colosseum over there; good, what?’

Verney nodded. Meyrick shook the ash from his cigar and replaced it meditatively.

'By the way, Verney, I am contemplating making a move very shortly. Did I mention it?'

Verney looked soberly in front of him at the mauve sky through the arch.

'No. Why should you do that?' he said after a moment.

'I think it expedient,' Meyrick said thoughtfully. 'My affairs seem to want looking after rather, to say the truth. I think it might be advisable for me to go back and look after them. I thought I'd give them a chance to improve. Well, they haven't taken it as yet. It looks as if I had better be on the spot.'

'You'll go back to Carolina?' Verney said unintelligently.

'I shall go back—yes.' He paused a moment. 'Of course, there's your point of view to be considered, too. I'm not doing you any good by being here, naturally. In fact, I'm afraid I've got you into rather a bad scrape—for the present. You'll get out of it, of course, when I'm off the scenes. If I hadn't known that, I should have left you before. But it's no good prolonging the business—strains tempers, what? There's a great art in knowing where to stop.'

The stolidity which always greeted the approach of certain topics settled on Verney's face.

'And then'—Meyrick glanced at him for a moment unperceived—'I've been, to put it baldly, living on you for the last—three months, is it? Well——'

'Oh, rot,' Verney broke in. 'That's utter nonsense, you know, talking like that. I mean, hang it all, if one person mayn't stay with another——'

He had flushed a little.

'You have also,' Meyrick continued, 'lent me a good deal of money, one way and another.'

Well, I hope for your sake that it won't prove a bad debt.'

Verney laughed.

'I've certainly no intention of taking anything back. I've not lent you anything to speak of.'

'My dear boy, I should have been very badly off if you hadn't,' his father observed with a shrug. 'These cigars, even—what? Well, to come to business: I can pay no debts of any sort at present. I must get out to the States again. I can get my fare out from your grandfather, if I can manage to convince him that I'm actually going.' Through his stolidity Verney winced a little. 'Once out there, with my affairs under my own eye, I hope I shall pull through all right. But I must have a little money to begin with. Can you lend me some?'

'Of course,' said Verney, with the unquestioning warmth of response that Meyrick Ruth liked.

'I must have some cash,' he murmured again, half to himself, rather abstractedly.

They passed under the Arch of Constantine, and turned to walk the length of the Forum. The setting sun faced them in a crimson glory; the sky behind St. Adriano and the Arch of Severus was a tender, deep rose-colour; the shadow of the Capitol lay darkly across the western end.

'I'm sorry you're going so far,' said Verney, with a little abrupt awkwardness. 'It's been ripping, you know, having you here.'

'Oh, it's just as well for you I should go,' Meyrick said—'just as well. And as for going far, well, it's no manner of good going to England, of course, because I should have nothing to live on there. I'm paid to live out of Europe, you see—

not very much, but still enough to keep me going.'

Verney looked away; he disliked the subject.

'You couldn't—you couldn't—well, do anything I suppose? In England, I mean?' The suggestion was tentative and embarrassed.

Meyrick shrugged his shoulders.

'No, I couldn't. What is there, you know? I'm no good at doing things; never have been able to earn my living since I left the army—where, by the way, I didn't earn it either, not by a long way. One didn't, in my regiment. What would you suggest? Reading for the bar, or what?'

'I suppose there isn't anything, really,' said Verney. 'In fact, I'm blessed if I know what I'm going to do myself when these three years are over.'

'I can't enter a profession at my time of life,' Meyrick said; 'and I wouldn't if I could—it's not worth it. No; there's only one way out of my financial embarrassments at present. But I shall come back again if ever I find myself able.'

'You must,' said Verney. 'Of course you must.'

Meyrick was looking through his cigar-smoke at the future with shrewd, speculative eyes. It was undoubted that he would come back, and the home-coming he saw awaiting him in a few years—but in how few or how many he could have wished he knew—was painted before him in bright colours. There would be no more wandering then; he would settle down and rest, and life would be a supremely pleasant affair. He was glad he and his son liked each other so much; it removed all difficulties in that bright, hazy future. Only, if he did not go away now, that future

might conceivably—Meyrick was prepared to believe a good deal of his father's stern resolution—fail him. Decidedly he was wise to go; there was a great art in knowing where to stop.

'A bore, my having to go,' he said regretfully, as they crossed the Piazza di Spagna; 'but we'll finish up in style—what?'

'Rather!' said Verney. 'We'll have a farewell dinner at the club. Whom shall we have, now?'

'I thought of that,' said Meyrick; 'in fact, I asked a few men I met this morning—you don't mind? For Thursday night, I said. Oh, we'll have anybody who'll come.'

'There'll be plenty of them, anyhow, then,' Verney said, speaking out of his experience.

As they went up the steps to their flat, Meyrick turned to his son.

'I heard from your grandfather this morning,' he said; and the careless announcement somehow conveyed that herein lay the gist of the matter they had been discussing.

Verney looked at him sharply. He wondered whether his father's letter had been to the same effect as one he had received a week ago.

'I've got you into a mess, you know,' Meyrick said. 'I'm sorry for it. You'll have to get out of it as quickly as you can. See?'

Verney muttered something, jingling the loose coins in his trouser-pockets.

'You'd better—well, apologize, so to speak,' Meyrick suggested. 'Make yourself pleasant—what? No good not making one's self pleasant, whether one's in the right or in the wrong; and I'm hanged,' he added comically, 'if I know which you are!'

'It doesn't make much odds,' said Verney

stolidly. 'And I should think the less said the better now.'

Meyrick looked at him, with a touch of humorous impatience puckering his forehead.

'Not at all; you're quite wrong there, my good boy. On the contrary, you've *got* to say something. My suggestion—and you'd better take it—is that you write and say you're very sorry you've been an ass, but that you couldn't well help yourself; and you've got rid of me now, much to your relief. What? You know you're not a bad hand at letter-writing—what they call a ready pen. Make use of it.'

He paused, and looked at his son with shrewd scrutiny for a moment.

'Don't go and make an ass of yourself, Verney,' he concluded more briefly; 'it's not worth it.'

But Verney seemingly found for the situation no comment, and turned into his room.

Meyrick looked after him with a shrug.

'H'm!' he observed to himself; 'my family—— It's a pity the young ass is so touchy, because it prevents reasonable discussion of the business. Well, I must leave him to pull through for himself. After all, he gets his wits from me, thank goodness! They ought to keep him floating. Pity, though, when a man isn't clever enough not to be pig-headed too!'

CHAPTER XII

GREY DAWN

A FAINT greyness, as of the beginning of the dawn, stole through the flung-back shutters into the room. The oil-lamp on the table flickered a little, as a little wind stirred the deep shadows of the sleeping street outside. Verney looked down into the shadows. The tall houses across the narrow street, so close to him now as he leaned out, had the blankness of closed green shutters, strange in the silent, dim twilight. Far below there were divivable huddled shadows within shadows; the doorways in Via della Croce were as good a place as any other for wayfarers to sleep. It was a warm night, but the dawn-wind brought with it a faint chill, dispersing a little the warmth of the shadowy darkness.

Three o'clock chimed, passing over the city like a watchword from church to church. Verney wondered vaguely how it happened that no two of the clocks chimed together.

Meyrick Ruth, who was sitting at the table, dressed for travelling, arranging the money in his purse, yawned a little as the hour struck. His train left Rome at half-past four; by no possibility could it be called time to start to the station yet. Meyrick felt that it might well have been time to start; everything was ready;

everything — it would seem — was said; the atmosphere was a little oppressive.

Meyrick glanced round at his son, who stood, still in evening dress—they had returned from the farewell dinner at the club at midnight—looking out of the window. His glance was sharp, scrutinizing, a little doubtful, more than a little impatient.

‘Confound the boy,’ he observed inwardly. ‘He’s making our parting most deucedly unpleasant. I suppose I really have shocked him at last—that’s the fact.’ There was regret in his eyes. ‘It’s a bore; but what’s the good of his cutting up rough about it?’

Presently Verney looked round. His face, always pale, was of a sallow pallor than usual; the shadows round his eyes and lips made him look rather tired. His brows had a stubborn set. He addressed his father, but looked past him at the oil-lamp.

‘Do you mind telling me,’ he said, ‘how often this has happened before, and who with? I should be glad to know the sort of amount you’ve won from the men you’ve played with.’

Meyrick looked at him for a moment silently.

‘My dear fellow,’ he said, ‘don’t be a fool. It’s no sort of concern of yours. You needn’t take it to heart so. It’s my business.’

‘I should be glad if you would let me have a rough estimate,’ the level tones said. ‘Or, no—not that; but let me have the names of the men you’ve won from.’ He paused a moment. ‘A fortnight ago, for instance,’ he said, ‘when you won a hundred and twenty francs from Ilbert at poker—was that—well, what about that?’ He had become suddenly nervous, and took to a critical examination of his shirt-cuff.

'Don't be a fool,' Meyrick Ruth repeated, cutting the end off a cigar.

Verney was answered.

'Then,' he continued, 'that evening Denham and——'

Meyrick rose to his feet.

'That'll do,' he said; 'I've no intention of undergoing a cross-examination. You're practising for the bar, I suppose. What's the good of raking things up now? One's got to live, you know. I know I've given you some right to feel injured. I admit that to-night I was a clumsy ass, and of course it was deucedly unpleasant for both of us having that sort of rather public flare-up;—Centurio's a melodramatic fool, by the way;—but after all it's my concern, not yours.' He looked at his son thoughtfully for a moment. 'I didn't know,' he said, 'that you felt like this about that sort of thing. You never showed me your feelings on the subject before. You weren't disgusted when I told you when first we met about similar incidents. What?'

'Yes, I was,' Verney flung back roughly. 'But it was no business of mine. It all happened ages ago; I supposed it was all done with. Anyhow, it didn't come my way, and I had no right to make a fuss about it.'

'I see.' Meyrick looked at him shrewdly, considering the situation. 'And now it has come your way, and you consider you have a right to make a fuss about it. Very well; only I wouldn't make too much, for the sake of your own peace of mind.'

There was a touch of impatient compassion in his keen, careless eyes. Verney looked at him as he stood there, pleasant, shrewd, kindly, half-amused, with eyes that comprehended so much

and so little, and a great bitterness surged over him—the old affection, the old sympathy of comradeship, the disillusion that was yet no disillusion, for what illusion had there ever been? He did not know that his eyes conveyed all that he did not say. Meyrick's softened. He put his hand on the boy's square shoulder.

'My dear old boy,' he said, 'I really am awfully sorry, you know.'

Verney winced away from the touch.

'There's nothing to say about it,' he muttered; 'there's nothing on earth to say about it.'

It was an entreaty, and as such Meyrick took it. He comprehended with some thankfulness that his son's point of view regarding this was identical with his own. They were neither of them sentimentalists: and there was nothing to say. Verney's eyes fell on the little pile of papers on the table.

'Bills, aren't they,' he said, and crossed over to the table to look at them.

Meyrick glanced at him carelessly over his cigar.

'Yes. Bills. Put them in the waste-paper basket. They'll have to wait till I come back to pay them.'

Verney was looking through them; his brows lifted a little once or twice. Then he folded them together, and laid them carefully aside.

'I suppose,' he said, 'it must be about time to go to the station. Is the carriage there?'

'It seems to be.'

They went downstairs together. The sleepy hall-porter saw them off with regret. He had liked Mr. Ruth. The tip he received now, however, was liberal enough to soften the pain of parting. Mr. Ruth and his son stepped into the

little cab, and rattled away over the stone streets into the pale, grey morning.

Very little more was said between them. Verney said once—this when his father was standing by the train, ready to get in—‘You’ve enough money?’

‘Well’—Meyrick shrugged his shoulders—‘that’s a strong way of putting it. I’ve enough to go on with, I suppose.’

Verney thought for a moment, and various probabilities occurred to him.

‘Whom have you borrowed from?’ he inquired, and wondered why he had not asked before. ‘Do you mind telling me?’

Meyrick looked at him in amused irritation.

‘You appear to feel a very acute interest in my financial affairs,’ he observed. ‘Well—I’ve borrowed from you, for one, you know.’

Verney waited for a moment.

‘Yes?’ he said.

‘Oh, it’s all right, my dear fellow. Everything will be paid back in good time.’

‘Ilbert, I suppose?’ Verney concluded. ‘And—Denham? Who else, please? Not Centurio?’

‘That, I think,’ said Meyrick reflectively, ‘was for Agnes’s sake. No; you didn’t think he’d have been such a fool, did you? Neither did I. I was rather surprised.’

Verney had grown brick-red. He muttered something savagely beneath his breath.

‘Beastly?’ Meyrick echoed, raising his brows a little. ‘Not in the least. It’s absolutely my concern, let me remind you. If anyone implies it’s anything to do with you, crush the suggestion at once. Tell them not to be impatient, and that I’ll pay my debts in due time. I must get in;

good-bye, my dear fellow. You'd better go home to bed ; you have a rather dissipated air in the morning light, you know.' He held out his hand, and Verney took it, not meeting his eyes. 'I've been a most confounded nuisance to you all along, haven't I,' Meyrick said whimsically, 'making you quarrel with your lawful authorities (by the way, mind you make that up, like a sensible fellow), inflicting myself upon you for three months, spending your money and wasting your time (you'll have to work hard to make it up, eh ?), and now dragging you through a ridiculous business like last night's. I'm sorry about that, Verney, really. I admit it isn't fair on you. But don't go and worry yourself about it ; everyone will have forgotten it in a month, and nobody thinks it's anything to do with you. . . . We've got on together rather well—what ?'

The shrewd blue eyes were very affectionate and a little compassionate, and possibly a touch contemptuous, as they rested on the slightly averted face.

'Yes,' said Verney.

'Well—good-bye, old man.'

'Good-bye.'

The train moved away. Verney watched it out of sight, then turned and walked slowly out of the station.

The day was being born ; it lay coldly, in pale, blue-grey shadow, on the waking city. The Piazza Cinque Cento lay grey and silent ; a few porters lounged outside the station gates, and a few sleepy cabmen were drawn up in a line. They woke to alertness at the sight of the Englishman in evening dress, but he shook his head and passed by.

'Late, isn't he ?' one said to another, with a

jerk of his whip over his shoulder at the retreating figure. He was answered by a tolerant shrug. A man walking the streets in evening dress between half-past four and five in the morning in England is apt to be ridiculed, or censured, according to the point of view of the observer. But in Italy one takes things more as a matter of course, and one is very tolerant, if one is not an official.

Verney turned to the right into the Piazza Termini. Rome was very ugly. He had not known before quite how ugly it was. It was like a great barracks in the steel-grey morning light. The prison rose, grim and square, to the left; to the right the clock of Santa Maria degli Angeli struck five from the Baths of Diocletian. It was in execrable taste, that insane jumble of creeds and chronology that everywhere stamped Rome. And the clocks that struck over the city were harshly insistent, in keeping with the grim ugliness of the whole.

Verney, walking straight on, passed the Palace of the Finances, and stared sombrely at the huge yellow pile; then turned down Via Venti Settembre, and walked down the straight length of raw new street, between the blank walls of shuttered houses and shops. In the deadness of the morning his steps echoed sharply on the stone paving of the street. Skirting the Quirinal gardens, he found himself in the street that led down to the Piazza di Spagna. There in the piazza there was life, roused and stirring. Early carts had driven in, laden with flowers, roses and carnations and lilies, which were already being set out in masses on the steps. Already, too, the models were assembling, with their little velvet-coated, goat-herd brothers. The water of

the fountain soared up, caught the pale, cold light of the unrisen sun in a hundred quivering threads, and dropped with a splash—the rhythmic splashing that does not cease day or night.

Verney stood still and stared at the sleeping houses, with their blank, unresponsive windows. It seemed to him infinitely strange that they should be sleeping thus still, with the day so many hours old. Then two models came up with button-holes, and smiles that faded away a little in alarm at the English signore's blank regard. They drew back.

'He's drunk himself stupid,' one of them murmured.

Mechanically Verney crossed the piazza, and began to walk down Via Babuino till he came to his own street. Opposite his own door he stopped for a moment, looking at it vacantly, and passed on.

Here life stirred. It had stirred all night; it did not sleep in these streets. Always through the night the sounds of the restless life of the streets rose insistently. Those who sought rest there knew.

The day was becoming busy; shutters were flung back in the steep walls that towered up on either side of the grey, shadowed street; wine-carts rattled by; street cries woke the morning. The little wind had dispersed the heavy atmosphere of the night, to make place for the air of the day, freighted with the manifold and grim suggestions of the Italian streets—cheese and fish, oil and coffee and drainage, all wafted together in a harmonious commingling.

On the stone steps of the doorways people still

lay huddled, seeking sleep, with faces turned from the white dawn.

One of them rose in Verney's path, his avid eyes noting the gleam of shirt-front, and pleaded for 'due soldi per maccheroni.' He was elbowed roughly aside with a sullen 'Go and damn yourself!' and fell back with a stare and a shrug.

Crossing the Corso, and plunging through a tangled maze of little streets, Verney came out upon the river-shore. Across the leaden width, not yet touched to golden brown, Trastevere and the Borgo were awake and stirring; they wake earlier on the other side of the river and go to sleep later, if, indeed, they sleep at all, being a people more full of life and blood.

Verney looked down-stream to where, half a mile away, Ponte St. Angelo hung over the shining ribbon, with its parapet angel-laden, and there rose beside it the Castle and the Angel, keeping guard over the city across the Tiber, and over the pale leaden dome that rose against the grey stillness of the west.

He walked along the river shore till he came to the bridge, then stood upon it and leaned against the parapet, and stared eastward at the paling sky. It turned gold under his eyes, and he knew that beyond the houses—the ugly mass of houses which was Rome—the sun had risen and was climbing the sky. It climbed within view, surmounting the houses, touching the world to gold. The river lost its grey hues and turned to burnished golden brown, its ripples sparkling as they swished softly against the piers of the bridge. The last chill vapour of the night was dispersed.

On the Trastevere side of the bridge a man

was singing 'Santa Lucia' as he unloaded vegetables from a cart on to an open-air stall. Like all Romans, he had powerful lungs; like some, he had a melodious voice. The full resonant strains came over the water with a melancholy pathos:

'Con questo zeffiro
Cosi soave,
Oh ! com' e bello
Star su la nave !
Su passeggiieri
Venite via !
Barchetta mia !
Santa Lucia . . .'

He broke off to fling a jest to a friend.

Verney, staring at the gold on the water beneath knitted brows, said aloud:

'It takes a damned lot of thinking about.' Then, looking from the river to the rising sun, he seemed to pull himself together. 'People will be about directly,' he muttered, and turned hastily homewards.

Across the Tiber floated the resonant melody, subdued to pathos by the water:

'Santa Lucia ! Santa Lucia !
Venite all' agile barchetta mia . . .
Santa Lucia ! Santa Lucia !'

Verney let himself into his flat with a furtive air that was new to him, and went softly up the marble stairs, his feet dragging a little.

The full morning light was pouring into the sitting-room through the wide-flung shutters. It lit up the white walls, the red-tiled floor, the plump cherubs and blue ribbons on the ceiling. It lay yellow on the undusted furniture, on the

marble-topped table, where the half-empty siphon and tumbler stood, and on the little pile of papers that lay by them.

Verney sat down heavily in a chair.

'It takes a damned lot of thinking about,' he observed, and went to sleep.

CHAPTER XIII

JUDGMENT

MRS. DONALD RUTH was going to leave Rome for England on Monday, and on Sunday afternoon her acquaintances called to take leave of her. Mrs. Ruth always liked to be at home on Sundays ; it was one of her Oxford-nurtured habits which she had never relinquished, even in the country, where it shocked her neighbours, and nobody came—a circumstance which, seeing that she enjoyed shocking them considerably more than she enjoyed talking to them, added an element of pleasure to the arrangement. In Rome, however, her Sunday afternoons were a much-cherished function. This Sunday a good many people came, English, American, and Italian, with expressions of regret at her departure and glances a little curious and interested—glances of which she gauged the meaning accurately enough. The Marchese Centurio was there, making himself admirably useful and entertaining, with a delicate shade of regret in his chestnut-coloured eyes.

Bowing the last lady out, he shut the door with the air of having got rid of a politely-tolerated but troublesome crowd, and sat down by his friend's side in the frail chair that just fitted him, and which always creaked uneasily under any male Ruth.

'Well, here I am, overcome with sadness,' he observed.

'Never mind that now,' she responded, sitting up with a new alertness.

He glanced at her deprecatingly beneath his brows. She caught the look.

'Yes, you know very well what I want, of course. . . . I wonder if those people thought I didn't know why they all flocked here to-day ?'

'They came to say good-bye to you, dear lady.'

'Fiddlestick !'—and he smiled at the interpolation of the quaint English word—'they came to see whether I was overwhelmed with a sense of family disgrace. Well, I don't think I was, was I ?'

'You've never been more charming,' he bowed.

'And now,' she said, settling herself in her chair, 'have the kindness to give me an account of the exciting occurrences at the club the other night. I've heard nothing—the merest bald outline. But I understand that you are in the best of positions to tell me about it ; isn't it so ?'

'That I am was a most regrettable necessity,' he said apologetically. 'You'll understand that, won't you—that I was overwhelmed with sorrow—that I would have given very much to avoid it ?'

She nodded a little impatiently.

'Don't apologize to *me*, for goodness' sake !'

'For a long time I said nothing,' he continued, 'though I knew. If it had been anyone else, perhaps I shouldn't have known, because it was so clever—really, most remarkably clever'—it was as if he would fain make amends by emphasizing the compliment—'but, you see, I was a little—well, on my guard, so to speak.' He was very apologetic now.

She reassured him by a nod.

'You would be, of course.

'And so,' he said regretfully, 'I perceived. But I said nothing for a long time.'

'Why?' she inquired.

He gave a little shrug.

'It was very awkward—those things are; they make such an unpleasantness. And—well, I was a friend in a sense; we'd seen a good deal of each other, anyhow. Besides,' he added, as one who comes to the gist of the thing, 'wasn't he your brother-in-law? Need I say more?'

'Oh,' she said vaguely, 'brothers-in-law don't matter. It's nothing to do with me.'

'And you must remember,' he added, 'that I'd just eaten his dinner.'

'Oh, his dinner,' she said, a little mockingly. 'Verney's dinner, you mean.'

'There'—he looked thoughtful—'was another point. Verney—yes. How far, I wondered, was the young man involved?'

She looked at him a little curiously.

'I didn't know,' he said. 'It interested me; I wondered—— Well, the situation couldn't, unfortunately, be prolonged indefinitely. I was losing more money than I could afford; I'm not a rich man, you know. I don't know if you play poker ever? It's a rather cruel game. Finally I came to a resolution, with some pain, and asked Mr. Ruth for an explanation of certain little incidents.'

'Yes?' She waited, interested.

He raised his brows slightly.

'Well, he wasn't able to give me one. That's all. . . . The result was, unfortunately, of the nature of a rather public exposure. A good many men had lost money, you see. Dio mio!—he

raised his voice in a genuine enthusiasm of admiration—'your brother-in-law's a genius!'

'How did he take it?' she questioned idly.

He shrugged his shoulders.

'As cool as you please—tranquil, debonair, business-like! There was no loophole, no explanation possible; otherwise he would certainly have found it. As it was, he looked the thing in the face—one saw him do it—and cheerfully resolved to make the best of a bad business. It was beautifully done.'

'I've no doubt he's had practice,' commented his sister-in-law calmly.

The Marchese laughed a little. He was becoming more at his ease, reassured by her cool detachment.

'How much practice he's had in Rome during the last three months is, of course, what we should all like to know,' he observed.

'And Verney,' questioned Mrs. Ruth, 'how did he take it?'

His eyes grew thoughtfully reminiscent.

'He said scarcely a word from beginning to end. Oh, just at the first he tried bravado—flung "What do you mean?" at me as if it had been a glove. Then, when it became fairly clear what I meant, and the situation elucidated itself, he said nothing at all—just sat and watched the thing out stolidly, without concern. At the end he handed us back the money we had each lost, taking it from his father as a matter of course, and they left the club together. Upon my word, I didn't know whether he had been implicated in it or not. It was generally supposed, though, that he had; public opinion was a good deal against him. As for me, I'm not sure.'

He paused thoughtfully.

'Oh, people are quite wrong about that,' Mrs. Ruth said carelessly. 'Verney mayn't be a saint, but he's got the ordinary code in those ways of other well-brought-up young men, I imagine. He's probably very much annoyed with his father.'

'You haven't seen him, then?'

'No; he's kept out of my way—thoroughly ashamed of himself and his father, I imagine.'

'I met him yesterday,' said Centurio, 'or, rather, he called on me.'

'That was a little cool of him.'

'No, it wasn't cool; he came to pay off a small debt.'

'Oh'—her shrewd mind grasped the situation—'so you've been lending Meyrick money. My dear Marchese, how absurd of you!'

He grew apologetic.

'It wasn't really much, but I confess I hardly expected to see it again. It wasn't in any way your nephew's concern, of course; it was very—generous of him. I hear that he is paying several of his father's debts. It struck me that if he takes all of them on his shoulders, he will find them a heavy burden.'

'Oh, he won't do that,' said his aunt with conviction. 'You know what these young men do—pay the debts of honour, and leave the tradesmen to look after themselves. I don't think that Verney can afford to pay many debts, either. I shouldn't imagine, from the style in which they did things, that his father has left him very much to live on; and he's quarrelled with his grandfather now, you know.'

The Marchese conveyed a polite regret.

'But not seriously, I trust?'

She shrugged her shoulders.

‘Nearly as serious as it can be, I believe. I don’t know the details, but it came of his insisting on going on amusing himself with his father all that time. I don’t know for certain, but I rather imagine it came to a threat of disinheritance before the end. My father-in-law, of course, hasn’t heard yet of this last escapade. I’ve no doubt he’ll be relieved to have got his son off the scenes at last, however ignominiously. He’ll be vexed at it, though; he’s very proud. He’ll be vexed, too, that the story should come through me. I’m not supposed to hear much of the family scandals, you know.’

Centurio surmised that the scandal in this case would lose nothing in the telling. He felt a vague movement of pity, not towards the culprit, but towards the pale, stolidly expressionless young man who had called on him yesterday and handed him a pile of notes with business-like frigidity.

‘I hope,’ he said, ‘that your nephew will make up his quarrels as well as he is paying his debts—his father’s debts, rather. It’s a great mistake quarrelling, specially when one is young.’

‘Oh, Verney usually manages to fall on his feet,’ Mrs. Ruth said. ‘He’s got his father’s wits, you see.’

‘She thinks there is a chance for the soldier son, but she is not quite sure,’ decided the Marchese. ‘She hastens home to make sure, if possible. It is an exciting game; I shall be much interested in its development.’

‘You will let me hear from you sometimes,’ he said.

‘You must send me all the Roman news, then. I shall be bored in England—oh! but bored to weeping! I shall be first on that horrible draughty hill, in that desolate old monastery;

then I shall go up to London. Life is tiresome, isn't it. I wish one could stay in Rome for the summer. By the way, I wonder what my nephew means to do about going away. He hasn't enlightened me, of course. If he's sensible, he'll come back to England and beg his grandfather's pardon. But I don't in the least suppose he will, and I dare say he wouldn't be forgiven just yet, even if he did. The old Colonel's a most obstinate old thing—all the Ruths are.'

Centurio met Verney Ruth in the Corso as he went home. It was possible, of course, that the young man had not seen him; it was extremely probable, however, that he had, in which case it was obvious that he intended a cut direct. The intention certainly seemed not unnatural, under the circumstances, the Marchese admitted, though he regretted the inevitability of it. He had not seen the involuntary stiffening of face, with Verney equivalent to a wince, which had betrayed recognition as they approached each other. Neither did it occur to him that, when a man has received in the course of three days a sufficient number of fairly severe slaps in the face, he becomes demoralized to the point of cowardice. Verney in these days was a coward, shrinking from a touch, walking the streets in fear.

He had, just before his encounter with Centurio, met a carriage driving down the Corso with two ladies in it. He knew both of them. One of them had met his eyes for a moment, then glanced quickly away. The other had looked over his head, seemingly unconscious of his presence, and his arrested hand had fallen from his hat.

It was just after this that he stared over Centurio's shoulder with blank eyes.

It was the most direct cut he had yet received.

He had seen others avoid him, look hastily aside, give bows slight and embarrassed; but this struck him full in the face like a whip.

It seemed that all Rome knew—all his acquaintances in Rome, anyhow, all who mattered. He did not resent being classed with his father in the matter. He had taken up his own position as his father's boon companion, and could not resent the recognition of it. He was inextricably mixed up in the business, and knew it.

The blows he received from the social whip stung and burned in his blood, because he was of a vulnerable make. He was also sociable. He had not realized before how much he cared for intercourse with his world—that small, pleasant, gay world which is so kindly to the young, so pleasingly welcoming to those who amuse it.

There was mingled with his bitterness now a vague, dull disappointment. There are those on whose ready comprehension and delicate tact we learn to rely; we feel that in their eyes at least we shall be judged by no conventional standards, appraised by no superficial rules. We believe that they will judge us according to our deserts, piercing to the root of things with eyes that discern; and that if they condemn us they will have weighed the case first. It was this feeling, vague and quite undefined—hardly realized, indeed—that Verney had about Rosamund Ilbert. He had not known her long, he did not know her well; of late they had had little intercourse, and that of a trivial and conventional character. Nevertheless, when she looked blankly over his head he felt as a man might feel who is struggling up a precipice and reaches out for a hand which he believes to be

there, and finds it roughly pulled away. The result is, in all probability, that he loses his balance and goes hurtling down into the chasm below.

The Ilberts, Verney told himself, had every reason to be angry with him and his father. They had led the lad Bill to waste his time and his money during the last two months; worse, they had used his folly unscrupulously for their own ends, as had been made evident that Thursday night. It was true that Verney had made what amends he could on the following day. He had called at the house and insisted on paying back not only what the boy had lent his father, but all, as far as he could ascertain, that his father had won from him at cards during the last two months, not giving Meyrick the benefit of a doubt anywhere.

He thought it possible—probable even—that here he wronged his father, but, with a kind of sullen, vicious pride, he would be on the safe side. To do it hurt him, because it was tantamount to an admission of the guilt of which he was not certain, and as such the boy, who at first stammered flat refusals, naturally took it. The same scene had been enacted with Denham, only Johnny, colouring angrily, had told him not to be an ass, and against that angry stubbornness his own sullen insistence could not prevail. Denham had taken nothing from him but the payment of his loan. Verney did not specially care as to the other. He had cared to pay Bill Ilbert because the thought of lying under an obligation, even of the remotest order, to the Cecil Ilberts stung him to anger. Any debts to them, real or fanciful, should be paid to the uttermost farthing.

Well, it seemed that he was to be ostracized by them as well as by the rest. He wished all these confounded people would clear out of Rome, go away for their summer change, and leave the streets free for him to walk about. There would be very few of them left in a month's time, probably; he would have the summer, anyhow, to himself. Till then one could stare in front of one and see nobody; and what, after all, did public opinion matter? He proceeded to pile fortifications round a very pregnable position, according to his custom.

It was, perhaps, as well that he had plenty to occupy his thoughts. He spent the days and nights in the settlement of his accounts. It seemed that life had been very extravagant lately, what with rather reckless hospitality, uneconomical amusements, and large and frequent disbursements to his father. These had accounted for his fellowship income for the year; the extensive payment of debts he was now undertaking consumed most of his allowance for the quarter. His grandfather paid him his allowance in quarterly instalments. On the last quarter-day the payment had been omitted; Verney had received instead a letter commanding him to return to England at once.

The consequence of these things was that he now found himself, at the beginning of May, with a balance of about a hundred and fifty francs in his bank. On that, and on anything else he might chance to earn, it was obvious that he must live, somehow, till—well, till he had more. Whether his grandfather intended to pay him his next quarter's allowance, which was due at the end of June, remained to be seen. At present they had dropped a correspondence which had

become trying to the tempers of both concerned, and Verney had no intention of re-opening it. The last word had been the Colonel's, a curt command to 'come home at once.'

Verney did not know in the least how long he was likely to be in disgrace; probably until he himself took some conciliatory steps, which he had no intention of doing. For matters had gone very far between them. When a man has threatened to disinherit you, it lies with him (so, at least, Verney saw it) to make the next move. To make it one's self savours of a plea for mercy. It would also have necessitated an admission of error. Verney had no inclination to say, 'I see now you were right and I was wrong.' When one is young and obstinate, one must stick to one's guns, even if they have exploded in one's face. One cannot then drag one's maimed body to the enemy, and beg for mercy. Besides, Verney was angry. There had been in the letters he had received, and especially in the last, expressions used which he did not find it easy to forget. He had torn the last letter across and flung it away, with, 'I don't see that that leaves anything to be said. It's obvious that we'd better keep clear of each other for a long time to come, anyhow,' and from that conclusion he had not receded.

What remained for him to do now was to make his own way and earn his own living. Even if the Colonel took no further notice of him, which Verney regarded as possible, if he could hang on to the end of the year he would be all right, for his fellowship income would come in then. Meanwhile, there were surely things a man could do to keep himself floating; and living was cheap in Rome, if one set the right

way about it. His present luxury must, of course, be abandoned; he must seek a dwelling elsewhere. His brows drew together as he remembered that that meant paying off his landlady.

Pretty little Lady Anstruther, after cutting Verney Ruth in the Corso, turned to Rosamund Ilbert with a little movement of the shoulders.

‘How awkward, wasn’t it?’

‘Awkward? What?’ Rosamund was gazing into shop-windows. ‘I’ve just seen my summer hat in Bocconi’s. White lace and black edging—did you see it? I feel I must possess it on the spot. What’s awkward?’

‘Why, meeting that young Ruth like that, of course.’

‘Was there a young Ruth? I didn’t see him.’

‘Rosamund, you cut him! You looked straight over his head. You only just stopped him from bowing. And I looked straight at him; it was so awkward. One doesn’t know what to do, quite. Of course, he must have known we saw him——’

‘No doubt. Why did you cut him, by the way?’

‘Rosamund! Of course one must. *Everybody* knows about it, you know.’

‘Well, I don’t see what that’s got to do with it.’

Lady Anstruther opined that it had a good deal to do with it. She did not want to be nasty, and no one could say she was a prude, but still, there were limits. When people—people’s fathers, anyhow (and there was nothing to prove that it stopped at the father)—were dishonest—well, in short, they had overstepped the limits.

Rosamund, to whom limits were, as a rule, more or less slurred, differed on the subject.

She put forth views on the practice of hitting people when they were down. 'It isn't sporting, to say the least of it.'

'Do you think Mr. Ruth's "down" ?'

'Well—naturally. And sometimes, when people are down, little things like that make a very great deal of difference. I've been out of temper with this young man for some time ; I thought he was behaving like a idiot, and so he has been. I also thought he was conceited, and so he was ; is still, I dare say. I haven't gone out of my way to be at all effusive to him (that's been easy enough, because he hasn't approved of me any more than I have of him). But now, when he's thoroughly dragged down, with his self-respect and vanity and belief in human nature lying round him in rags—well, of course, if one met him one would have to be exceedingly nice to him, and give him a chance to pull himself together again. It's the thing he's got to do now. He'll have to do it for himself, but we can all help him a little bit. We can, anyhow, avoid hitting him in the face like that—in the way you and I did just now.'

Kitty Anstruther was a little bewildered. She was rather often bewildered by Rosamund. She supposed, as Rosamund seemed to care so much about the welfare of this young man, that he had been paying her attentions. She was often a little put to it to know whether Rosamund was in earnest or jest ; she was puzzled by a manner so casual, so carelessly, randomly inconsequent, that it often led her to take mockery for literal earnest, and earnest, thrown out in the same casual, matter-of-fact way, for jest. Consequently, she did not know Rosamund in the least. She now came to the conclusion, 'She's

a little bit smitten'; and not wishing to trample on her friend's feelings, said tactfully, 'Of course, I don't want to blame him. I dare say he's very nice, really.'

'Which,' said Rosamund carelessly, 'is neither here nor there.'

She talked no more on the subject to Kitty Anstruther, knowing of old that that young person, though by no means devoid of wits, suffered from the obsession of one point of view, which fact made her comprehension singularly impregnable to attacks from other quarters, which had no connection with it. It is sometimes possible to reach the understanding of those who know nothing; it is often not at all possible to approach those who know one thing well, and neither believe in nor desire to learn about anything else.

CHAPTER XIV

THE PASSPORT

THERE is a Tuscan proverb which states that 'Dorme chi ha dolore e dorme chi è debitore.' Verney should, according to this, have slept exceedingly well in these days. But, possibly because he was not a resigned debtor, but spent his days doing accounts, he spent his nights in falsifying the proverb.

On Monday night, because he felt extremely bored, he went to a café-chantant, where he smoked some bad cigars, listened to some bad singing, drank some passable wine, and sat in a shaded corner, keeping a furtive eye on the door, though he had purposely selected a resort not likely to be frequented by his acquaintances. He went home at a late hour, smoked some more cigars, read a Tauchnitz Jacobs, and was finally seized with a desire to see how Rome looked in early dawn. He had seen it before, but of that he carried no remembrance beyond a vague impression of hideousness, and of a resonant voice shouting 'Santa Lucia' across the Tiber. He went out, therefore, and renewed his impressions, wandering from street to street in the grey stillness, that paled and brightened as he walked. Finally, when the sun was near rising, he climbed the steps up to the Capitol, and stood for a moment in the piazza, dreamily wondering how

many tubes of gold paint it would take to regild the Emperor on his horse, what the net cost would be, and why nobody did it. Then he followed the Via del Campidoglio down towards the Forum.

He turned the corner, and a little way in front of him, standing at the angle of the steep, winding road from whence the whole Forum first breaks on the eyes, he saw Rosamund Ilbert. She was leaning her arms on the broad wall, and looking over the Forum to the east, where the dawn was spreading.

Verney drew up, abruptly arrested, paused a moment, then would have retreated hastily. As he turned she looked round and saw him. With stiff, immobile face he had raised a mechanical, tentative hand to his hat. Then he saw that she was smiling and had turned wholly towards him, holding out her hand.

He could not ignore the proffered hand. He took it stiffly, his face set more stubbornly than he knew.

'You've come to see it, too?' she said, with a motion of her hand eastward. 'Wait; the sun's coming.'

Mechanically he stood at her side. In the numbness of his mind he was hardly surprised. Dully he knew that it was strange and unaccountable that she should have held out her hand, extraordinary that she should have smiled. A little later he remembered that the strangest thing was that she should be there at all, out alone in Rome at the dawn. But that did not seem surprising to him. He had never thought of her as a person bound by conventions. There was about her a fine carelessness that ignored them at all times when it seemed to her good to

do so, forgetting, indeed, their existence. At another time he might have smiled at the characteristicness of it.

He did not smile now, but looked, with heavy eyes, at the pale pure blue of the dawn sky behind the Colosseum, and at the ruins which stood up against it, touched with the pure, fair light. The dawn broadened and deepened ; it touched the eight great pillars of Saturn just below, lay palely over the length of the Julian basilica, and shone yellow through the three pillars of Castor and Pollux, and through the Arch of Titus, that stood, more faintly drawn, in the dim, still distance. Beyond that the great broken form of the Colosseum rose, with the campanile of Santa Francesca Romana in front of it, and a wealth of pink peach-blossom round ; and behind, the pale violet sky turned to a gold lake. The violet receded, creeping higher inch by inch ; the few little level clouds across it turned first softly pink, then to bars of flame—flame unearthly in the pale purity of its gold. Then, above the broken sweep of the Colosseum, the sun rose into the still hush of the waiting world.

A lark rose suddenly, seemingly from the cliffs of the Palatine, shot up straight into the still, violet sky, singing, till he was out of sight—a fitting homage to the glorious birth of the day. When his voice had melted away, the great, strange hush seemed to be emphasized. It seemed to Verney that they two were alone in the silent, dawning world. Standing a little behind, he watched, half-consciously, the dawn-light resting on the straight, pure profile, and on the careless hand that lay loosely on the parapet. He was scarcely thinking ; only some phrase of

Johnny Denham's seemed to echo vaguely in his ears . . . 'a sort of look, don't you know, as if she could see miles further into her subject than anyone else; as if she'd felt things, and understood things, and known things, and they all come shining out of her face' . . .

He supposed Denham had meant this. And this, again, to him was new. He had known her for two people: the one of an easy, half-humorous, quizzical friendliness; the other (and this was of late), a person uninterested, grave, politely, indefinitely aloof. Looking at her now, he realized new elements, vaguely. . . .

She turned towards him.

'Well—so that's over.' Her voice fell strangely into the hushed morning; then she laughed softly. 'And to think that I meant to paint it! That's what I came out to do, you know. Absurd cheek, wasn't it?'

In the moment that she looked at him she knew exactly how pale he was, how heavy-eyed, how stubborn-lipped; how he was standing sullenly at bay with his back to the wall, hurt, very bitter, and pitifully unstrung. She knew, incidentally, that he had not been to bed that night.

It was characteristic of her that she made no comment on the strangeness of the coincidence that they were both there at such an hour. She was not of those—and it is a class—who comment on small coincidences; she had a habit of taking things casually, and very much for granted.

'You came just in time,' she said. 'I've watched it since the greyness began to turn blue; it's been very wonderful. . . . It's rather tragic, isn't it, how sometimes, in going about the streets, and tearing round in the sort of whirl we most of us go in for here, one forgets what Rome is—almost,

sometimes, forgets it's there, you know. But it always is there, waiting for us. That's a great comfort, and much more than we deserve.'

Verney muttered some assent. He had a bewildered feeling of being in a strange dream. He knew that it could not really be that she was talking to him like this, as if nothing had happened; nay, talking to him as she had not talked for the last three months. Now, in the light of retrospect, he perceived the delicate shade of difference, the coolness that had of late marked their intercourse. Where was that coolness now? Where the disgust that he had made sure she felt—that, indeed, she had shown him but two days ago in passing? He knew that he was regarded askance by his world; but here was a portion of that world receiving him with a new friendly intimacy hitherto unreachd.

It was possible, of course—he knew something of Rosamund's in consequence—that she had forgotten for the moment all about his affairs.

Then, because the dawn-light transcended all trivial misapprehensions, he understood her as well as she understood him. His strained face relaxed a little, because his world had not wholly renounced him. None the less his defiant instinct was to hide his wounds from sight, wincing from a touch; even a look would have hurt him. From her he got neither touch nor look; she leaned over the wall and looked towards the rising sun, and talked of trivial things.

'To think one must leave it!' she said. 'It's a bore going away for the summer—rooting one's self up and having a horrible journey just when the year is getting so nice. This year we're only going to Albano, though; that'll be rather thrilling. You're going away, I suppose?'

'No,' said Verney, 'not as far as I know.'

'Oh! but during the summer, July and August, surely? You'll be a most phenomenal and perverse Englishman if you don't, let me tell you. We *all* go, like so many sheep.'

'Then I shall be deprived of company,' Verney said, with a fond and futile effort to imply regret at the prospect.

But again it was borne in upon him, with mortification and with a strange comfort, that he need feign nothing.

'Yes; you'll pine in loneliness. I believe it's really true that it isn't especially wholesome in the hot weather, though. I think you'd much better go home to England, like other people. Oh, I forgot!' She caught herself up. 'I'm giving him advice, and he doesn't like it. You may throw something at me, if you like. You won't? Thank you; that's very magnanimous! But you'll come and see us at Albano, won't you? Mother loves to have people.'

He stammered something. And then quite suddenly the rigidity of his self-control broke a little. He was horribly aware that it was long since he had slept; that he had been up all night, and living at high tension for four days; aware, too, that his disgrace was lurid, and that he was most horribly ashamed, and that he could not carry on this conversation any longer.

His hand, that was clenched over the parapet of the wall, shook so that she winced to see it. He began to stammer, incoherently.

'No—I can't—I can't come—I—I can't . . .'

He pulled himself up sharply and bit his lips.

After one swift glance she had looked away from him.

'I expect you'll have any amount to do,' she

inserted for him. 'Don't bother, but we shall be glad to see you if you can find time. . . . You know the Denhams are going back to England directly?' She was talking swiftly, easily, giving him time, looking away from him. 'I shall miss them horribly. But I'm glad they're going. However, that, I believe, is a bone of contention between us, so we won't dig it up. They've probably expatiated to you on the folly of thinking Rome possible to stop in through the summer, haven't they? So I don't suppose they've left much for me to say. Not that I should attempt to say it if they had, knowing your views on the subject of good advice. Let me see, it either sets a man more on his own way, or it unsettles him, doesn't it, which is fatal—perfectly fatal. At all events, admit that I am repressing my natural sins most heroically. Why so many yellow cats, and why do they all sleep in the Temple of Saturn?' Her eyes rested for a moment on the hand clenched over the parapet. The shaking had ceased. 'I am becoming drivelling,' said Rosamund. 'That's because I am up too early. We are both up too early. And now we'll go home to bed. It isn't six yet, and breakfast isn't till nine. I don't feel as if I could bear it. When do you have yours? But I suppose you can have it when you like, being so happily on your own. I should order it for six-thirty this morning, if I were you. "The café which is called complet, with a roll and a pat of butter." Horribly disappointing, isn't it. But we have fried sole—perhaps you do, too? No; never eggs. We tried them once only. There's a carriage; let's attract it to us.'

They had followed the road down to where it skirted the Forum on the north side.

'You're going to walk?' She gave him her hand from inside the carriage. 'Good-bye. . . . I wish you'd take my unuttered good advice, if only to show your gratitude for my self-suppression.'

In his unsteady hand hers rested for a moment, cool, and firm.

'Good-bye,' he said.

He stood long looking after the little rattling carriage, that cast a sharp black shadow in the clear, early light.

'Why?' he thought. 'Why?' and then answered the question: 'Because she's sorry for me, of course. She would be; I might have known that. To be in a thorough ghastly mess is a sort of passport to her kindness, of course.'

He spoke bitterly, but his late experience of the world's chivalry had not been such that he found no comfort in the thought. With her voice still in his ears, he realized abruptly the wayward charm of her personality—generous, carelessly gracious, wholly lovable. . . .

He went home and dropped on to his bed, and slept a long, tired, dreamless sleep.

His landlady, coming in at eight o'clock, moved the shutter so as to keep the morning sunlight from the bed. She looked pitifully at the pale face that, relaxed from its stubbornness, looked only very tired.

'Poverino!' she murmured. 'I wish I could afford to keep him here and say nothing about the bill. Eh, perbacco, he's spent his money and brought it on himself; but it's a hard world! Well, well, debtors and those in trouble always sleep well, thank God!'

Rosamund came down to breakfast that morning exceedingly late. She had a habit of coming

down late, remarking obscurely that she disapproved of burning the candle at both ends. She found her cousin Jane in the breakfast-room. Jane regarded her with some severity as she rang for fresh coffee and looked wearily at the cold fried sole.

'You must have had that a very long time ago,' she observed, a little plaintively.

'Of course we did,' Miss Gerard replied. 'Hours ago.' She looked at her with critical sternness. 'Why those ridiculous eyes?' she inquired.

'Don't know. Getting up too early, I suppose.'

'Oh, I forgot. What about the sketch, by the way?'

'There was no sketch. It would have bored me horribly to make a sketch. I merely observed; then I conversed with Mr. Ruth.'

'Oh! Was he observing too?'

'I can't say how much he observed. He was a little—well, *distract*, you see. And then I came home and went to sleep for a little. And then I went to see the Denhams.'

'Goodness! Did you wake them up, then?'

'They had woken. It was half-past eight. They're going at twelve, you see, and I thought I'd say good-bye.'

'Oh! Was it an affecting parting?'

'Very affecting. Quite horribly. I watched Maggie pack. The child packs so well, do you know. Much better than I do.'

'Well, that wouldn't be difficult.'

'Janey, I am so fond of them. I hope—I do hope they'll get on all right.'

'Very improbable, without you to look after them.'

'Janey, I warn you, I may sob if I am gibed at

this morning. I am too maudlin to bear it. I got up too early, I think. And there's scarcely any honey left. What can I do to be away for lunch? I shan't want any after this, shall I? The children, you know, are very much distressed about Mr. Ruth. They think it a fearful thing that he should stay on here all the summer working. Johnny thinks he's horribly poor, though he won't own to it. Maggie rails against society, which shows its disapproval of Mr. Ruth *père* by cutting Mr. Ruth *fils*. Altogether, they were rather out of temper. They've scarcely seen him, apparently, which constitutes another grievance. He seems to be turning his back on all his friends—naturally, I suppose. He just called on Johnny to pay him his debts, and Johnny looked him up once, but found him so unapproachable that he hasn't been again. I don't wonder they're a little distressed about it. When I met him this morning I came away feeling as if I'd been watching a man at the stake.'

'Does he mind so much? Poor young man.'

'Yes, he minds.' Rosamund paused a moment; her tired eyes grew pitiful at the retrospect. 'One felt so horribly clumsy; one didn't know what to say. One had really simply to say nothing, of course; only make him understand somehow that one was sorry, and understood, and didn't think any worse of him. If you'd seen him, Janey! He was absolutely white, and obviously hadn't slept for ages. It was as if one could see right down below the sort of shield of sullen defiance he had put on outside, and knew exactly how bitter and hurt he was. He was fearfully unstrung, too. Once—it was horrible—he all but broke down. It was all he could do to pull himself together. I went on talking, of

course, and pretended I hadn't noticed anything. If he had let himself go any more, he would have hated himself afterwards. But it was very heart-rending altogether. He gave me the impression of being in the sort of state, you know, in which he might at any moment have a complete nervous breakdown—go all to bits. You'll be pleasant to him, if ever you meet him, Janey? Those sort of things do make a difference, even if one is in very bad trouble. It is pitiful to think how little one could do, though. . . .'

'I dare say,' Miss Gerard said, a little drily, 'that you did about enough for one morning. By the way, you ought to be glad, you know, for the sake of his moral welfare. You once said you hoped he'd have a tumble, to take down his self-assurance.'

'Did I? I dare say. Yes, he was conceited, wasn't he. I dare say he is still. He certainly cultivates an air of aggressive defiance now. Poor Humpty-Dumpty! It'll take more than all the king's horses and all the king's men to put him together again. Yes; of course he's conceited. If he wasn't, he'd go home to England and beg his grandfather's pardon, and make up the quarrel that his atrocious little aunt told us all about.'

'Of course you told him so?'

'I did not. Not a word of good advice did I offer him; you would have admired the way in which I bottled it all up. I monologued; I think I drivelled; I rather think I talked about cats, and the things we have for breakfast.'

'And he listened?'

'I shouldn't think so. I trust not. He—well, he stood and looked rather sick and shook a little, and refused most emphatically to come and see

us. But I think he must have understood I was endeavouring to make myself pleasant, which was what I hoped to convey. No, Jane, it was *not* funny. You wouldn't chuckle if you'd been there; it was much too heartrending. When he suddenly began to shake—I could have sobbed. Don't you know, one wants so fearfully to say all kinds of soothing, comforting things; instead, I had to talk inanities, and pretend I didn't know anything about it.'

'I don't wonder you look worn and weary. And all this before breakfast!'

'Long before. It was about five.'

Miss Gerard laughed again, silently.

'I was wondering,' she explained, 'what Aunt Elsie would say to your dawn interview.'

Rosamund smiled a little.

'Yes; I suppose it was the sort of thing that would be called odd, wasn't it. Somehow, that point of view never struck me before.'

'Oh, nobody would expect it to strike *you*.'

'It wouldn't have seemed to matter particularly if it had, you know. Life isn't long enough to bother about those things. Oh, and I asked him to come and see us at Albano. I said mother would be delighted to see him.'

'I should think Aunt Elsie would see him further first,' observed Jane.

'Do you think so?' Rosamund wrinkled her forehead a little doubtfully. 'I wonder.—Oh, here you are, mother. We were just talking about you. You shall decide the question for yourself. No, dear, I'm sorry to say I didn't have a very nice breakfast. But then I didn't deserve to, you see. Jane says you would turn the outcast from your doors; I defended you. Defend yourself, please.'

'What outcast, dear? Has there been one this morning? I'm afraid I really can't give anything to that old Luigi, you know; he's such a fearful old scamp.'

'It isn't that old Luigi; it's that young Mr. Ruth. And I don't know that I should go so far as calling him a scamp, "if never certing," as Mrs. Green says. The fact is, mother dear, I said you'd be glad to see him if he called.'

'Oh!' Little Mrs. Ilbert looked doubtful. 'After all that's happened, Rosamund——'

'Yes, mother?'

'Well, dear—really, I don't think we can, you know.'

'You shouldn't bear malice, mother.'

'That father of his must be such a very shocking person.'

'He didn't bring his father up, you know.'

'No, dear; but his father brought him up. They were quite inseparable, too; did everything together. I don't say the son is dishonest necessarily——'

'Let's give him the benefit of the doubt.'

'But anyhow he's a rather dissipated, extravagant sort of young man. He gambles dreadfully, you know.'

'I don't think he's got very much left to gamble with now.'

'And he and his father had the very worst effect on Bill. They were really very tiresome about it.'

'I'm not denying it, mother. But now, you see, he's paying the penalty for his father's sins and his own. He's fallen into very low estate.'

Mrs. Ilbert hesitated.

'Is he unhappy, do you think?'

'I do think so.'

Mrs. Ilbert softened perceptibly.

'Poor boy! You think he felt his father's——'

'I suppose, if one's near relations do those things, one does feel it, you know. If father was convicted of stealing spoons, wouldn't you be a little sorry for me? I should be exceedingly sorry for myself.'

'Rosamund, dear! But—well—if he's unhappy, poor boy, I suppose——'

'Of course you do. There, Jane, I told you you were slandering my mother.'

'Do you think I'd better write and ask him to dinner, dear?'

'No, mother. I think we'd better let him alone; to hide his head in a hole if he wants to. I wanted to display your generosity before Jane, but it's quite wasted, because nothing will induce the outcast to come. He's much too sulky.'

CHAPTER XV

A MODEST COMPETENCE

THE time came shortly when Verney's meditations over his finances led him to the abrupt conclusion that charity, after all, began at home. He flung the little pile of still unpaid bills—they kept coming in day by day—on to the stone floor, and put a match to them, finding a vicious pleasure in watching them consumed. Thereupon he informed his father's bootmaker and a few other gentlemen that Mr. Ruth had gone abroad, and that their accounts would have to wait; neither was he himself in any way responsible for the bills in question. Then he packed his belongings, paid his landlady (who said she wished she could have made it less, but, ecco! one must live—an observation which Verney sadly endorsed), tipped the little servant—shamefacedly, because it was a shabby tip—and migrated to some exceedingly cheap rooms in the Via de' Giubbonari, which is a small street leading out of the Campo de' Fiori. For these—for this, rather—he paid ten francs a week. The room was very near the top of a great rabbit warren that was let in flats. It was exceedingly warm, and looked out upon a courtyard, which lay at a giddy depth below, and of which the insidious odours, nevertheless, climbed up, especially at nights, giving rise to the perpetual

question whether the courtyard air was or was not preferable to the unadulterated atmosphere of the closed room. The issue was complicated by the question of mosquitoes. Sometimes Verney would toss up, and on these occasions never failed, in vicious defiance of the ruling of chance, to take the opposite course to that indicated to him.

As to the room itself, it was an attenuated oblong, and rather suggested Poe's story of the man who saw the hot metal walls of his room gradually closing round him. These walls were of hot pink plaster, and badly needed a new coat of paint. If they had closed round the occupant of the room any more than they did at present, it would have been exceedingly alarming.

The camp-bed stood against one wall, Verney's portmanteau against another, the rather rickety washstand against a third, and the very small table and Verney's own very large easy-chair about filled the space in the middle. Verney stacked his books on the floor, in a corner. He was working in these days, albeit spasmodically. Fortunately for him, archæological work must needs be pursued out of doors rather than in, so that his four pink walls knew him little by day.

He did not at first make any great efforts to find remunerative employment. It is at all times hard for the delicately nurtured to realize that they are really to be left entirely on their own resources, to sink or swim as they can. He did not own it to himself, but as the days passed and no sign came from his grandfather, the aspect of affairs slowly changed to him. He thought over his situation one night when the coin had decreed that he should have courtyard air and mosquitoes, and the upshot was, 'I must get something to do

which will keep me going for the present ; then, next quarter-day, I shall find out what he means to do about the allowance.' That was near the end of May ; quarter-day was in a month.

But to get something to do, which is so easy in the planning, is surprisingly hard in the performance.

'It seems it can't be done,' he remarked, returning one evening from a fruitless journey of exploration, and sitting down rather wearily in his room.

'Eh ?' queried his bed-maker.

She was a small child of twelve, who wore her hair twisted in a very large knot on the top of her head, and noisy, clapping, heelless shoes. She also had very bright dark eyes, and a rather intelligent face.

'I didn't speak to you,' said Verney, who was out of temper. 'And why do you never begin to make my bed till you hear me coming home in the evenings ?'

She laughed merrily. The question amused her, and she liked to hear the signore inglese trying to talk Italian. Something in the bare-faced impudence of her mirth partially restored Verney's good-humour. He looked at her tolerantly.

'If you had no money, Filomena,' he said, after a moment, 'what would you do to earn some ?'

She looked at him sideways.

'Keep rooms, signore.'

'Oh, would you ? And suppose you hadn't got any rooms to keep, what then ?'

'I sell flowers sometimes, signore, and sing. To-day I got three francs. The Piazza di Spagna is the best place, signore, because the English are there.'

'So they are. One might try that, of course. Only it might be awkward if one couldn't sing in tune, mightn't it? I feel sure my singing would be very pleasing to the ear, but then those English in the Piazza di Spagna are so confoundedly particular. Think of something else.'

Filomena thought.

'My cousin roasts chestnuts,' she observed, after a moment.

'I'm hanged—what do you call it?—*ammazzato*, you know—if I roast chestnuts in this weather!'

'Ah yes, it is too hot now; people don't buy chestnuts in the summer. The signore might keep a shop?'

'The signore has no shop to keep. These ventures need a little preliminary capital, you know.'

'He might serve in a shop, though. There is the shop across the street; they sell cream-cheeses and fried fish—'

'I'm only too well aware of that,' Verney said. 'I think I'm near enough where I am, on the whole.'

'The signore doesn't want to?' questioned Filomena, puzzled and non-comprehending.

Verney's rendering of his sentiments into her native language had a certain literalness that, if picturesque, was hardly lucid.

'No, the signore doesn't; he thinks it would be too strong for him.'

'Too hard work for the signore? Well, he could make shoes, perhaps?'

'I'm sorry to say he couldn't; he's rather lacking in brains, I'm afraid.'

'Ecco!'—a luminous idea flashed to Filomena's eyes—'the signore paints!' She swept her small brown hand towards the table, where a few littered papers lay. 'The signore could paint pictures?'

'He might ; but that wouldn't quite serve his purpose, you know. He wants money, not an occupation for a rainy day.'

'To be sure, when it's wet,' added Filomena, catching the last phrase, 'it spoils all. The rain washes the picture off the pavement like a sponge.'

'Oh, the pavement !—I see. I forgot that branch of art. Upon my word, I think that's the best idea you've struck yet. One does ships on a blue sea, doesn't one, and——'

'And lakes and trees, and the Arch of Titus, and the falls of Tivoli.'

'Oh, does one ? One's very ambitious, it seems. And how much should you say one gets per day at that job ?'

'It depends on many things, signore. Where one sits is, of course, of great importance.'

'I should think one would sit in the Piazza di Spagna, near the steps. Then the English would see one from their windows, and throw coppers down.'

Filomena shook her head a little sadly.

'There are so few English left now. It is such a pity that they leave Rome in the summer.'

'True ; I forgot that. It makes trade bad, doesn't it ? Well, now, if you are sure the bed is completely made—thank you very much. I must think over your suggestion ; it seems to have points. . . . Can I do anything more for you ?'

The child had stopped in the doorway, and was looking at him with critical and amused wonder in her eyes. She gave a little puzzled laugh.

'I was thinking,' she informed him, 'that it's very funny there should be such a poor inglese.'

'Is it ? What a lot of sense of humour you've got. I don't know that it appeals to mine

especially. Why is it a better joke,' he added resentfully, 'than there should be a poor Italian?'

'Why'—she opened surprised eyes, 'the inglesi are all rich—but very rich, indeed!'

'You delude yourself—you make a gross mistake. You draw your conclusions from insufficient data.' In his injured resentment he had lapsed into English. 'You judge from the bloated aristocrats in the Piazza di Spagna. I might as well judge your countrymen from the pampered and luxurious organ-grinding classes in the streets of London. You may go.'

Filomena recounted this interview in detail to her parents over her supper.

'A poor inglese!' she repeated, in puzzled mirth.

Her mother, the stout landlady, shrugged her shoulders.

'There are a great many such, silly child! This young man has very likely committed some crime; he has, perhaps, escaped from justice—*povero disgraziato!*'

Filomena nodded sagely. The idea was familiar, and in no wise shocking.

'We must look out,' said her father, 'that he doesn't escape one day without paying his rent for the week.'

Verney sat rather gloomily in his room, thinking over his affairs. He had entirely failed to get the tutorial work he had at first looked for with some confidence. It seemed that no one wanted instruction in English or in anything else. It was probably the wrong season of the year for it.

He jingled the few loose coins in his pockets, and wondered if he would go out and get some

supper, or if it was not worth the money. In the midst of his meditations someone knocked at his door.

'Oh, come in,' Verney surlily flung over his shoulder.

There came in a very cheerful and gaily-dressed young man, with a reckless upward twist in his moustache that hinted that he was the very devil of a fellow. He lived on the floor below Verney's, and called himself an artist because occasionally he haled in a model and painted a very bad picture. For the rest, he lived rather from hand to mouth, and his name was Valerio, and he had of late rather taken up with Verney.

'That you, Valerio?' Verney did not turn his head.

'Yes. You seem bored, caro. Come with me to the Galle and hear Rignetta sing—eh?'

He sat on the bed and put his hands in his pockets, surveying Verney with an air of sympathy.

'No, thanks; I haven't time.'

'Oh, time!' The young gentleman nodded sagely, taking this for what it was worth. 'Well, see here, come and have a little supper somewhere,' he suggested tentatively, wondering whether Verney's 'time' would run to this.

'I think I won't, thanks,' said Verney, and his friend looked compassionate.

He sighed the next moment, in self-pity.

'I don't think I shall be able to pay my rent this week,' he observed.

'Save it off your supper,' suggested Verney unsympathetically.

'Money's the devil,' said Valerio, and sighed.

'This beastly town of yours,' said Verney, 'is a singularly poor place for the unemployed.'

'It is,' the young man assented. 'They turn socialist, the unemployed.'

'Do they? I don't imagine that helps them much, does it?'

'It gives them something to occupy their thoughts. They write, you see, for the *Secolo*, and publish pamphlets.'

'Oh, that must be a comfort to them, certainly.'

Valerio's eyes roved round the little hot room. They fell on the table.

'Why,' he inquired, 'don't you sell your sketches?'

'It takes two to make a sale, unfortunately.'

'Have you tried?'

Valerio turned the two or three paintings over with his fingers.

'No; they wouldn't fetch anything, of course. They aren't worth anything.'

'They aren't worth much,' the young man returned frankly. But see here, I'll tell you—you could sell them for postcards. Hand-painted postcards, you know, are all the rage now. They fetch quite considerable prices. I tell you, it would be worth your while. I've done it sometimes. You couldn't sell them as pictures—they aren't good enough; but postcards—perbacco, these postcards they sell often aren't any better than these of yours. I can introduce you to a man, if you like, who'll buy them.'

'Thank you. If you think it worth while, I might try it. . . . Look here, I think I'll come and have supper, after all. I believe I'm hungry. Only I warn you, I'm going to an infernally cheap place; so you can go anywhere else you like.'

Valerio sighed a little.

'It will be best for me, too,' he said, 'to go to a cheap place.'

'Then, who knows,' Verney said, 'perhaps we may both find ourselves able to pay our rents to-morrow. If not, we shall anyhow have eaten.'

'One shouldn't be in a very great hurry to pay one's debts,' Valerio said philosophically. 'We have a proverb, you know—"chi ha debito ha credito"—which it is useful to remember.'

'And we have a proverb—"charity begins at home"—which it is also useful to keep in mind. Useful things, proverbs.'

When Verney came home that evening he sat down to write a letter. It had been borne in upon him with some force that, unless he could obtain some money from somebody shortly, he would have to do without that commodity altogether. He had no intention of doing that, so he swallowed some portion of his pride and determined that his cousin Humphrey should lend him five pounds. Humphrey seemed the only possibility. Roger was in India. It was hardly possible to imagine the impecunious Charlie in the position of lender, besides which Charlie was at Abbots Verney, and his appeal would certainly come to his grandfather's ears, a contingency against which Verney's pride revolted angrily. He was, at all events, not going to let his grandfather know into what low estate his misguided course had landed him. If the Colonel chose to withdraw his support, he on his part would show that he did excellently well without it, thought Verney, doggedly resentful.

It did not please him to have to write even to Humphrey; however, Humphrey was not, as far, at least, as Verney knew, in the category impossible to approach of those who were acquainted with recent events; and he was, presumably, at a safe distance from Abbots Verney.

To Humphrey, then, Verney wrote.

In one respect he had, unfortunately, miscalculated. Humphrey, when he received the letter, was not in his Westmoreland parish, but at Abbots Verney. He opened the letter at breakfast. The Colonel looked ostentiously away from him as he read it and talked to Mrs. Ruth. She possibly served his ends as well as her own by asking :

‘How is Verney gettin’ on?’

‘Oh,’ said Humphrey consideringly, ‘he seems a little hard up.’

The Colonel turned fierce eyes upon him.

‘Does he tell you so?’

‘Yes,’ said Humphrey simply ; ‘he mentions it. Says he can’t afford a decent smoke.’

The Colonel bit his moustache angrily.

‘He’s been grossly extravagant—grossly. It’s abominable. He’s wasted and gambled his money away, and now, I suppose, he wants you to get me to send him more. What?’

‘No.’ Humphrey looked at the letter again. ‘No, I don’t know that he wants that. He doesn’t say so.’

‘He means it, though. That’s his way of doing it—coming whining to you instead of writing to me straight. I’ve no patience with him ; I shan’t send him a penny, and you can tell him so.’

Humphrey was a little resentful at what he thought his grandfather’s perpetual injustice to Verney.

‘I assure you he doesn’t whine,’ he expostulated. ‘He merely remarks that he is a little hard up. There’s what he says.’

He passed the letter across the table. Humphrey was a simple person, and no diplomatist. Colonel Ruth read it hastily, then flung it back.

'Lend him five pounds, indeed! He'll have to want it more than that before he gets it. Insolent young Jackanapes! "Rather hard up," indeed, and "can't afford a decent smoke"—cigars at ninepence each, I suppose he means. Don't send him a penny, Humphrey. He'd write differently from that if he really wanted it.'

Which conclusion his friend Miss Prendergast would have characterized as 'Francis all over.'

'Well, I think I shall send him the five pounds,' Humphrey said tranquilly.

The Colonel said nothing, but buried himself angrily in the *Times*. Presently he pushed back his chair and got up.

'He should have written to me,' he said sharply. 'It would have been more straightforward. Not, of course,' he added, 'that I expect straightforwardness from Verney.'

Humphrey had learnt the futility of rejoinder.

The Colonel left the room and went to his library. He had the air of being a very old man of late. It betrayed itself in his walk, not long ago singularly firm and erect, in his unsteady hands and uncertain movements. He sat down rather stiffly in a hard leather chair.

'The same old thing,' he muttered. 'I remember . . . Meyrick used to write to Donald. . . . They don't like to write straight to me—don't dare to, I suppose. Well, he shan't get anything out of me till he does, and not at once even then. He's not going to get off so easily as that. He shall learn that he can't run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. He's chosen his lot, and he must stick to it. He's disgraced the family, by God, and I'll have nothing to say to him—nothing. He can write to his father for money. He can gamble and swindle honest

men's money out of their pockets. I'll do nothing more to stop him. I wash my hands of him.

His face had flushed darkly ; his hands gripped fiercely over the two arms of his chair. He sat so for a minute, then his face grew slowly grey, with the dead, weary pallor of age. A little quiver passed over it.

'He should have written to me,' he said, and his hand sank forward a little.

Verney, three days later, received two letters. The first he read cursorily, the gist of it was the enclosure, which he pocketed with careful satisfaction. At the other he looked for a moment with distaste, then, with chin become stubbornly prominent, he opened it. It was only a few lines. Verney turned brick-red as he read them.

'You will not find it any good whining to other people behind my back,' it ran, coming with admirable pithiness to the point. 'You will not get a penny from me by those means. If you are sorry for your conduct during the past months—your gross disobedience, extravagance, and dissipation, and what I must assume to have been your participation in dishonesty—you can return to England and give me what explanations and apologies you can. Nothing can undo the past, but you will not be deprived of a chance to retrieve yourself, if you choose to take it. I have not the least expectation that you will, however, and until I hear from you in a very different strain from any of your former letters, I shall not communicate with you again.'

'Damn,' said Verney beneath his breath, with bitterly concentrated emphasis, and roughly tore the paper across.

There was a kind of hopeless, angry bitterness

in his face as he stared before him with compressed lips and drawn-down brows.

‘What does Humphrey mean by showing my letters like that? I never said he might, silly fool! . . . So he thinks I’m whining for money. All right, he shan’t get a chance to think that again. I wonder if he imagines it likely that I can go home after that?’

He tore the letter again across and across with savage vehemence, and flung the fragments out of the window. Then he sat down and wrote a hasty I.O.U., adding beneath it :

‘DEAR HUMPHREY,

‘Many thanks. I should be obliged if you would not in future show my correspondence to other people.

‘Yours,

‘V. M. R.’

The ungraciousness of his acknowledgement somehow soothed him a little.

It was very soon after this that he met Hummel. Hummel was stout, Austrian, and clever, and his shop (he was an art dealer) was in Via Babuino.

Young Luigi Valerio effected the introduction, taking Verney to call on Hummel at his private address, close to his shop, in the Via de’ Greci. Valerio explained Verney a little, then left them together. Hummel looked scrutinizingly at the sketches before him, then shrewdly at the clever, clean-shaven face, where moroseness lay beneath the mask of impassivity, thinly concealed.

‘You vant,’ he observed, ‘to sell your paintings?’

‘I do,’ said Verney.

Hummel tapped the sketches with his square fingers.

'They are worth very little,' he said. 'You will get for them—practically nothing.'

'As postcards——' began Verney.

'I was coming to that. As postcards, indeed, they will be worth some money. You have done postcards before, perhaps?'

'No.'

'Ah! Well, we must talk about it.'

They talked about it. Verney, coming home afterwards, sought out Valerio.

'I expect,' he said, 'I have been cheated; but no matter.'

Valerio shrugged.

'Surely,' he said serenely. 'Hummel is a very clever man; he cheats everyone. You had a long interview, caro.'

'Why, yes. Hummel was telling me about picture postcards. It seems there are all manner of different schools in the trade—the Austrian, the Swiss, the French, the Dutch, and I don't know what. Hummel was inclined to think I assimilated to the methods of one Herr Manuel Wielandt. I was much flattered. There are many pitfalls that I must at all costs avoid—impressionism, Dutch and French——'

'Oh, caro, that will do! You forget I've been in the business myself. I've had it all dinned into me a hundred times. Did Hummel tell you to go and paint the sun setting behind the Colosseum?'

'Something similar. He informed me that it was worse than useless to be particular as to truth in details. The public want a good effect, and if they like their Colosseum against a red sky, they must have it.'

'Yes, devil take it. I explained to him with fury that it was making of one's paintings

coloured photographs at a penny a piece—you know the things. All the brute would say was, "One paints to sell; one must paint what will sell best." It made me weep with rage, because it is relegating one to the level of a machine—a fool who knows nothing of art. He would not say those things to Wielandt, or Grollo, or any of those people.'

'They don't work for him, of course?'

'No.' Valerio shrugged his shoulders. 'Our Hummel doesn't employ that sort; he's no use for them. He likes to get men who are—well, in need of work, you understand, because he gets them cheap, and doesn't much mind what the level of their work is, as long as they do plenty of it. I introduced you to him,' he added apologetically, 'because those better men, who pay more, have already their staff. Hummel always wants more workers; he sells a great deal, you see.'

'So he told me. He also told me that it was necessary for him to sell very cheap.'

'Ah! He apologized for that?'

'I imagine he gathered from me that an apology would be appropriate.'

'Ah, yes. It isn't much to earn, I admit. It's shamefully little. Our Hummel is a swine and no Christian. But anything is something; it ekes things out—*ne?*'

'It's what one calls in England a modest competence,' Verney said. 'I've no doubt it will minister to my simple needs.'

CHAPTER XVI

THE REDUCIBLE MINIMUM

It was odd that Verney had esteemed himself to be living cheaply in the Via de' Giubbonari. Looking back, during the period of his career which followed, upon those four pink plaster walls and camp-bed, and window opening on to the courtyard, he accused himself of extravagance, of riotous, pampered living. He flattered himself that he had learnt the trick in these later days; the trick, that is, of the very reducible minimum. Minimums have to be reducible; without elasticity they are chains, that weight and gall. Being blessedly elastic, they will squeeze in and in; and then for reward they may be treated to a little expansion sometimes, if occasion serves.

Verney treated his minimum occasionally; often enough for existence to have about it a certain spicy, pungent flavour of uncertainty. There was a sublime lack of the obvious about the course of his days at this time. 'But plain living,' he commented, 'is, I imagine, only accompanied by high thinking when the thermometer stands well below eighty in the shade.' Verney's thinking in these days was notably plain.

If you go westwards down towards the Tiber you enter the region of the city which is called

St. Angelo. You plunge through a maze of obscure and dirty streets (for St. Angelo is a region of the very poor) skirting the Ghetto, crude in its raw renovation, finding yourself in a region of many temples and theatres, where dingy houses rest on the shoulders of forgotten, nameless ruins. Passing through the Portico di Ottavia, you get into the Via del Teatro di Marcello. It is rather a narrow street, and on the opposite side to the theatre there are houses where it is possible to get lodging for extremely little money. The rent of these rooms, though small, does not strike those who live in them as in any way disproportionate; on the contrary, the rent and the rooms seem admirably suited to each other.

Verney, by pressure of circumstance established here before the end of June, missed his pink walls and his rickety washstand. These walls were of an antique buffish hue, that left wide room for speculation as to the original theory of the thing. The enamel jug and basin rested on a stool. The window was a very slim aperture, and looked on to the street. In the street stale vegetables seemed to be sold, morning and noon and night, and frequently fish, apparently of a rather greater age.

When Verney looked out of his window he could see opposite him the Theatre of Marcellus (he did it for a postcard once), with the row of little vault-like shops in the lowest tier of arches. It was exceeding dark inside the shops, and the occupants for the most part worked in the street outside, so that Verney got an excellent view of their operations. Opposite him there was a cobbler, a small, dark, dwarf-like person, with a curiously sardonic twist to his face; a certain

stunted unloveliness seemed common to all these dwellers in the vaults. Verney traced in them, idly, the blood of the Ghetto. Having a turn for the constructive crafts, he found an immense interest in watching the shoe-making operations. He came to the conclusion that it was a good deal more interesting than painting postcards, and was in two minds whether to offer himself as cobbler's assistant or not. 'Next time I want boots I shall certainly have a try at making them,' he observed.

On one side of the cobbler there was a carpenter, who was also interesting. He was less grimly taciturn than the cobbler, and when anyone stopped by his door and passed the time of day, he would leave his lathe and straighten himself, and pass a very pleasant half-hour. His name was Emilio, Verney gathered.

On the cobbler's other side there was a *pizzicheria*—a shop which sold dried fish, macaroni, cream-cheese, grain and lentils, and other delicacies. There was a subtle insistence about this shop which defied one to forget its presence even in the night, when the shutter stood up against the vault-shaped opening. Next to it was a shop which sold cigars. Verney had not yet bought any; he kept them in mind, as a last resource of the destitute.

One thing he had managed successfully—he never now saw a face he knew. His friends, such as they were, were all new. He was not without friends; the nearest at hand was old Giusti, his landlord's father. The family lived, according to Italian custom, three generations together. The landlord was a cautious and suspicious individual, with a face somewhat lowering, and temper a little surly. His wife was

sharp of tongue, and managed the family affairs with the air of one who will wring the utmost profit out of life to the last centesimo. But the old father, whom they kept rigorously in subjection, was a sweet and pleasing person, with a beautiful, clear-cut, refined old face, and an amiable and garrulous sociability. He attached himself to the new lodger with pathetic admiration—admiration of the wonderful paintings, which, he learnt, were to become *cartoline*.

'They will sell for a great price, *ne?*' he inferred.

'Originals three francs eighty, lithographs twopence,' Verney returned, with mechanic promptness.

'*Davvero!* But that isn't much.'

'It is not,' Verney said grimly.

'Can't the signore get more than that for them?'

'Oh, the signore doesn't get that, you know. Hummel gets that. The signore gets—whatever Hummel is pleased to give him.'

'Ah! He's a rogue, then, this Hummel?'

'Why, no. He's a very worthy man, and understands his affairs excellently. Hummel must live, you know, like the rest of us.'

It was Giusti who introduced him to the priest. He was the parish priest of Santi Maria in Campitelli, and used to come and visit the dwellers in the Piazza Montanara and the adjacent streets. He was a great friend of old Giusti's—a cheerful, rather plump person of about forty, with a kindly, humorous face and shrewd eyes. He knocked at Verney's door, that stood wide because of the heat, came in, said 'Pax vobiscum,' and sat down, explaining that he came at the suggestion of his friend Giusti, and that he was

delighted to make Verney's acquaintance. It so happened that Verney had been asleep in his chair. He had of late contracted a habit of falling suddenly asleep in the daytime; he resented it, because, though one was awake in the night, the nights were useless for work. He was apt to spend them walking about the streets, seeking good points of view, till it became cool enough to make 19, Via del Teatro di Marcello possible to contemplate.

He had started up and offered the priest a chair with dazed politeness, and now sat trying to remember why he had come and who he was. The priest looked at the heavy-eyed, rather dishevelled young man, and round the tiny room, and puffed a little. He had come up many stairs, and the thermometer stood at 87°.

'I interrupt your work,' he said with tact.

'Not at all,' said Verney, imagining himself to be telling a polite untruth.

'It is hot to sit indoors.'

'Yes,' said Verney. 'I am out nearly all day.'

'Ah! You paint, don't you? Giusti told me——'

The priest was sorry for the young man, who was obviously so poor, and who started so violently when anyone knocked at his door. Having learned from Verney that he was not thinking of leaving Rome for some time, that he regarded Rome during the summer months as a particularly desirable place of residence, and that painting postcards was a very interesting occupation, he chatted for a little on various subjects, then be-thought himself of his duty, and said:

'You don't come to mass?'

'No,' said Verney.

'Ah!' the priest said compassionately; 'a heretic, no doubt.'

'I suppose so,' Verney said listlessly.

The parroco put his finger-tips together and pursed his lips, and made the best of a bad business with:

'Ebbene!' Then his eyes twinkled. 'You'd much better become converted, you know. Rome isn't healthy for Englishmen in this weather. Supposing you were to get the fever——'

'There would still be time,' said Verney.

His listless boredom gave place a little to liking, as he caught the jolly twinkle; and so with the parroco, too, a friendship was formed.

There was another acquaintance of Verney's who resented this friendship. He was a fiery young man who lived in the room above Verney's, and Verney surmised that he must spend his time in throwing his furniture about the floor. He would come into Verney's room and sit down on the bed, and say that the things he wished for were few and moderate. The King no doubt was head of a faction which was opposed to all advance—a faction which allied itself with the military, the capitalists, the landlords; but did Verney suppose he wanted to abolish the monarchy? Verney, a little at sea at first, would say he did not know. Afterwards he learnt to say politely, 'Not at all.'

'They are wrong,' continued the fiery young man, 'those fools who say we want to assassinate the King. And those who say we wish to abolish property are wrong. There are a few things we want—the referendum, universal suffrage, the eight hours' day, the liberty of the press, the payment of deputies, the nazione armata——'

He paused for breath.

'I hope you may get it,' Verney would say kindly.

The fiery young man waved him aside and finished his list. He always ended: 'Only one thing will serve—we must have a class war. That will put these miserable borghesi in their places. I write it in the *Secolo* every week, but whom does it benefit? Nobody—nobody, I tell you.'

'Does it pay?' Verney asked, mildly interested.

His interests of late had become painfully and exclusively financial. The fiery young man glowered at him.

'Do you suppose I do it for the money?' he demanded. 'Does one serve one's country for soldi? No!'

Which emphatically closed the subject, and left Verney uncertain as to whether Socialism was a lucrative hobby or not. After all, as he reflected, it could hardly have concerned him if it had been so. He admitted a certain ludicrousness in the egotism of his point of view of late. His impulse on seeing a man selling mosaic brooches and bootlaces in the street was to question him as to the financial profitableness of his career. He had all but, when woken by the parroco, moved, perhaps, by his plump air of well-being, inquired, 'Does it pay, your profession?'

It was obvious, however, that his sordid point of view was an offence to the more spiritually minded. He failed to grasp why this should be. After all, one works to live. As Hummel worded it, one paints to sell. Money was the axle on which one's world revolved; when the axle weakened and dwindled, the world began to revolve with great difficulty and friction, and

extremely slowly. In time it might cease to revolve altogether, perhaps. It behoved one to see to one's axle.

The plump priest made a few remarks about the fiery young man in the flat above.

'Povero matto!' he said, and drew his shoulders compassionately up to his ears. 'One of these foolish young men who have got a little education and don't know what to do with it.. I've heard he was intended for the priesthood, only he was wicked enough to turn sceptic—like you, figliuolo mio—and now he has nothing to do with himself. There are a great many of his sort. They try to get municipal appointments, and fail. "What is left?" they say Presto! they turn socialist. It is a disease. They occupy themselves with exciting the poor stupid beneath them in education, crying, "Down with the King! Down with property! Let us have a class war!"'

'Paolo says he doesn't want to assassinate the King,' Verney put in.

'Ah, the magnanimous youth!' The parroco's eyes twinkled. 'And he hates me, this Paolo—*ne*? He hates all priests. He trembles, he perspires, he grows pale, when he sees a priest in the streets—he hates them so much. That is because he was nearly a priest himself. They are all jealous, these socialists, of our influence with the people. But they ought to love us, for we, too, are enemies of the Court party. Paolo, nevertheless, does not love me—*ne*?'

'Not much, I think.'

The good priest sighed a little.

'I feared as much,' he said.

It was Giusti who introduced Verney to the weekly interest of the lotto. He met Verney on

his way downstairs on Saturday morning, and, as usual, buttonholed him. He wore an air of excited mystery.

'I have something to tell you. Listen a little. I haven't told a soul — not Mario or his wife or anyone. But I had a letter to-day from my sister's daughter, Teresa, who is married to a cantoniere in the country—ecco, the signore may read it.'

The signore failing in the attempt Giusti made the great announcement himself. Teresa, it seemed, had dreamed of his Holiness the night before last.

Verney's comment, perhaps, failed a little in adequacy; he was buttonholed more emphatically.

'Yes, really! As I stand here and say it to you, Teresa dreamed that his Holiness was eating nespoli, and he said—he said, signore, to Teresa, that the nespoli were too dry; and one of the stones which his Holiness put out struck Teresa on the hand. But, really, signore, it's the truth. Then Teresa woke, and she found that her youngest child was throwing nespoli stones about the room, and, sure enough, there lay one close to her hand. Well, Teresa smacked the child, and then she sat down and wrote to me, to make sure I heard by Saturday. And now, signore, I tell it to you. Ecco!'

He released Verney's coat and stood back with a throwing out of the hands, as one who would say, 'There! make what you like of that!'

Verney said it had been a very interesting dream.

Giusti looked at him and chuckled.

'Ah! the signore doesn't mean to say much about it; but he will go straight to the banca del lotto and stake—*ne?*'

'Oh!' Verney collected his wits, 'what a fool I am! The lotto—yes, of course. And your sister's daughter dreamed of nespoli. Well, what's the number for nespoli?'

'Nespoli! nespoli!' Giusti looked at him in perplexed despair. 'Why, signore, Teresa dreamed of his Holiness!'

'Oh, I see, of course. Well, what is his Holiness's number, then?'

The amazed despair grew.

'Signore, you're making fun of old Giusti! All children know that his Holiness is fifty-eight; one has no need of the book to tell that.'

'I am sorry; I know very little. But look here, I dreamed myself last night. I dreamed about a goat. I will stake on him if he has a number.'

'There is no number for the goat—I'm sure of it. Besides, what a chance to miss! To hear of a dream of his Holiness only two nights ago, and not to stake on it! Impossible, signore! You must stake on Teresa's dream—I wish it. You will do me this pleasure, signore? You must put fifty centesimi on his Holiness. I prayed to the Madonna, and she has sent Teresa this dream. I myself will stake twenty centesimi. Signore, you will do me the favour?'

Verney did him the favour.

In the evening Giusti said, 'The blessed saints know what is best for us. Another time, perhaps.' Every Saturday evening he used the same words.

The thing took Verney's fancy. It amused him week by week to stake his pence on the ambo, the terno, or the quaterna. He recorded the laws of chance, as deduced by him, on a chart, and staked with punctilious adherence to it,

almost breaking Giusti's heart by his placid ignoring of the leadings of Providence, which caused men to assassinate their wives, wrecked trains, threw down houses, all unheeded. Once Verney won, which amused him immensely. It was of the nature of clutching at straws, this entertainment, because life in the main bored him immeasurably. Undoubtedly, however, the summer in Rome had one good point. With all its faults, one had it to one's self. Verney's cowardice by degrees disappeared. He began to walk the streets without furtive glances to left and right. Once, indeed, near the end of June, his returning courage received an unpleasant throw-back, from which it took time to recover. He met Centurio face to face in the Piazza Colonna.

The Marchese stopped and held out an amiable hand, which Verney had perforce to touch.

'This is a great pleasure,' said Centurio, 'still to come across a friend in Rome. You are the last of your countrymen, I imagine, Signor Ruth. They all desert our city in unflattering haste when the suns of June begin. I myself shall be going into the country next week. And you?'

'I am staying on here.'

Verney wondered how Centurio could have had the bad taste to speak to him.

Centurio thought it a pity the young man should be so curt—sullen he called it to himself, as he glanced at the stolid, impassive face. He himself was prepared to overlook any unpleasantness there had been in the past, and it would have been more amiable in Verney to have done the same. But no doubt the unfortunate youth was melancholy because he had quarrelled with his family and was in reduced circumstances.

The Marchese felt a kindly desire to cheer him up.

'You must come and dine with me'—he laid a friendly hand on Verney's arm—'at the Cavour, at eight this evening—favorisca!'

'Thank you; I'm afraid I can't.'

'I am distressed.'

The Marchese had all but said, 'To-morrow night, perhaps?' but something in Verney's air checked the words on his lips.

'Good-evening,' Verney said curtly, and turned away.

'A rivederci!' Centurio amended. He went on his way with a shrug.

'He bears a grudge, that young man,' he observed to himself. 'He wished me in hell when I stopped him. Well, well.'

He considered the situation for a minute.

'I wonder,' he added, 'how the prospects of the large soldier son progress. From his cousin's air I should say they were not doing badly.'

CHAPTER XVII

THE GREAT HEART OF THE PUBLIC

It was, possibly, the great heat which made life at this time such an infinitely tedious affair. Rome through this June and July sweltered under the heavy, unbroken chain of her hot days. People said it was the hottest summer that had been known for ten years. All the little rooms that honeycombed 19, Via del Teatro di Marcello stood wide, gaping for breath, getting none from the steep, narrow stone stairs that wound up past them, carrying with them the hot kitchen smells; getting little, and that of dubious quality, through the windows that gasped upon the deep stone street, shut in by the great block of the theatre. All the little vault shops at the base of the great block became as so many small chambers of an inferno, black and hot. The dwellers in the vaults sat in the street outside all day, like so many goblins guarding each his underground dwelling. Emilio, the carpenter, mopped his forehead, and caught at every chance of converse with passing friends; but the cobbler, as the heat grew, worked the harder, with a sardonic twist of his black little face that evinced a grim relish. The presence of the dried fish and the cream-cheese in the next shop became emphasized, heavily underlined; it lay, mingling with other elements in a rich aroma, down the hot street,

rising to the windows above, where the washing hung out like gay banners.

Rome was ugly. Verney had discovered that in the grey dawn of a morning that now seemed very long ago. He discovered it afresh now each day; new uglinesses rose to meet him wherever he went, crowding, in their sordid, tasteless hideousness, upon his listless gaze. With a kind of surprised disgust he remembered that there were people who admired this city; the disgust deepened as he remembered that he had at one time admired it himself in a way. There were still, he supposed, the things one admired in it; things, however, surely not so very admirable, after all—one discovered that if one painted them for postcards. And these things were not the important part of Rome—they did not constitute the city one lived in; they were mere appendages, show places, which the English in the Piazza paid to go and see. For the Piazza di Spagna these places possibly signified Rome; the Piazza di Spagna was grossly, heavily ignorant. It peacefully ignored Rome as it was. It was left to the dwellers in the Via del Teatro di Marcello to know the real Rome, in its dull squalor, its crude, raw hideousness.

The heat beat up from the stone streets. It seemed to strike one dizzily in the face; the glare of it made one's eyes ache. Sometimes the sirocco would hustle along the streets, burning with hot dust, flicking the rubbish into one's face. Everyone lounged outside their shops; bargaining became a very languid game. All the *trattorie* had awnings outside; there people sat through the heat of the day—people who were not compelled to paint postcards for their living. The fountains in the piazzas were surrounded with

loafing groups ; it is merciful that in the piazzas there should be one cool spot. Along the hot shores of the Tiber dried, stale, yellow foam lay stranded in feathery piles, with Rome's refuse drying among it. The river-shore was not a good place to walk along in these days ; yet Verney, being so near, used to walk there often, loafing in the evenings and nights along the Lungo Cenci, idly noting the fresh deposits of bones and sticks and yellow foam as the river's level sank lower between its quays ; loitering on the Ponte Quattro Capi, and hearing the bells of San Bartolommeo clang across from the Island for vespers, making across the shrunken water a strange, hollow sound.

It was an irony that fate should have laid upon Verney the painting of this grotesque city just at the time when he had discovered its manifold ugliness. He did not wish to paint it ; it was not beautiful, and it was immeasurably boring to have to try to make it appear so. If he had been allowed free scope, if he had not been compelled to paint that Hummel might sell, he would have painted in a style immensely different. The real Rome should have appeared then ; a series entitled 'Rome in Summer,' or possibly 'Rome as it Is,' would have shown the squalid city in all its grotesque plainness : the stale foam, the stranded refuse, the hot, aching glare of the unbeautiful streets, the crude vulgarity of the tasteless whole. He would do that some day when he had leisure, and take thus his revenge on the city to whose ludicrous vanity he had now to minister with smooth, lying, profitable flattery. He would do that—if he ever handled a paint-brush again after this : that amendment he made, and, in making it, knew that his sweet revenge

would recoil upon himself, because he hated painting so much. He would always, after this, hate painting. Once, like a fool, he had thought he liked it; he had esteemed himself to do it rather well. Hummel had taught him better than that.

Meanwhile he painted, and still painted, ministering to Hummel's wants with dogged fervour. Hummel said: 'Get picturesque bends of the river, and always have San Pietro in your background for those. The public will have their San Pietro.' Verney laughed a little to himself, because the bends of the river were so ugly, but painted them with a large, flattering charity, as one would paint a vain woman if one knew one's business, and gave to the insistent, ever-prevalent leaden dome a soft pearliness in the morning light, a delicate boldness against the red sky of sunset.

'The public like their red sky,' Hummel said. It was beyond question that, whatever Hummel's limitations, he knew his public. Verney observed him with listless curiosity, as a strikingly complete example of the effacement of all private tastes and preferences, or, rather, of their identification with the desiring fancy of the great buying public. The public was not whimsical; its taste was calculable to a nicety; the interest of experiment was eliminated; speculation had no place in the trade, Verney found.

On the other hand, fancy might play, rampant and unchastened. The inflexible dogma of things as they are was no part of the creed. When Verney painted the Colosseum from the Palatine, Hummel said, 'Vere is your pink blossom?'

'What pink blossom? I didn't see any. What do you mean?'

'Almond blossom,' said Hummel; 'apple, plum, cherry. I don't know, I don't care. The Colosseum from that point of view must have blossom; the public demand it.'

'The public can't have it,' said Verney, 'in July.'

'Yes; in July, in August, at Christmas—any time.'

'How can I paint pink blossom when I don't see any?'

'If you cannot,' said Hummel testily, 'you must be a great fool. The public will not care whether it is good pink blossom or not, but pink blossom they will have; they insist.'

'Then,' said Verney crossly, 'everything will have to be quite different. I must make it a spring picture—spring grass, spring trees, spring sky.'

'As to that,' Hummel said placidly, 'it is as you please. I think you need not bother; the public will not know any difference.'

'Very well,' Verney said, 'I'll cover the ground with snow, then; nothing but white snow and pink blossom. It will save trouble and be picturesque, and I have no doubt the public will be delighted by the congruity.'

But he did not often lose his temper with Hummel; it was not worth while.

He learnt by degrees the necessary components of a picture—the string of scarlet seminarists crossing the piazza, the man in sombrero and the girl in laced-up bodice and folded handkerchief, the gay wine-cart, the vividly-hued garments hung on clothes-lines across the narrow streets.

'One's more sober clothes do also go to the wash,' he reflected, 'and are also hung out to

dry. But the "public" would be profoundly unstirred by them. So his lofty houses, leaning to meet each other, hung out their fluttering ensigns of red, blue, and yellow. He painted the Via del Teatro di Marcello once, choosing washing-day, and taking an occult pleasure in incarnadining his own shirts. To wear them the next week was disappointingly flat; there was an indeterminate huelessness about them which made him hanker after the more vivid hues of his portrayal; there would, anyhow, in these have been the satisfaction of achievement, instead of the discontent, as now, of an unapproached ideal. That ideal, however, and the things it typified, had become of surprisingly little moment to him of late. Well-washed shirts are, to the average man, of so much less importance than regularly calculable meals. And one's meals depended on so many things: whether there was a cheap enough *trattoria* near at hand, without the waste of valuable time involved in going to seek for one; whether one happened to be in funds at the moment, or had just paid one's rent, or launched into other extravagance. Verney was occasionally overcome by a mood in which he flung his money about with reckless lavishness, being compelled thereto by the irresistible swing of reaction; on these occasions he would swear softly and viciously, and let loose his pent-up instincts—he was not naturally of an economical bent—through a reckless evening. For these dissipations he would pay the next day by a rigid and enforced abstemiousness. On the whole, it worked out fairly well, and was a more interesting way of life than a dull adherence to the necessary minimum would have been.

Sometimes it was much too hot for the idea of

food to be at all alluring, and that again was an economy. Verney admitted it, as the heavy hours passed, and he painted on, torpidly mechanic, the brush slipping in his wet fingers. His mind, meanwhile, revolved round his next enterprise, seeking to probe the heart of the public, wondering if they would buy a Temple of Vesta (he named it thus, his pride broken, catching up the vulgar denomination, which a few months ago he had contemptuously scouted—Rosamund Ilbert would no doubt have been edified to hear him); or if they would prefer St. Peter's, the ubiquitous, seen through an avenue in the Villa dei Cavalieri, or a Forum view (Hummel objected to details of the Forum, and had cavilled at a sketch of the Fons Juturnæ as archæology rather than art—the public liked their Forum in gross, and they liked a bright sky behind it); or whether he should go outside the walls, and give the public a Campagna view, with a tract of the Appian Way, ranks of tombs, and a wine-cart; or possibly the new Appian Way, with aqueducts, a pine in the foreground, and still the wine-cart (most emphatically the public liked their wine-cart). And all the time he was conscious, vaguely, that if he had not been forced to paint postcards for his living, and if he had not been painting for Hummel and for the public which Hummel interpreted for him, and if it had been a little cooler, and if certain episodes in his career could have been obliterated from his consciousness, he would have found in his employment a certain fascination. There were, even in this ugly Rome, street corners, sudden openings and glimpses through carved old gateways into cool courtyards, cloisters most quiet and bright in

the evening sunshine, which it might, under other circumstances, have been almost worth one's while to paint. . . .

'Rome is always there, waiting for us,' Verney had been told once. The words, which he had scarcely heard at the time, because he had been thinking about something else, came back to him sometimes, with import grown a little sinister. They were absolutely true; Rome was always there, waiting to seize one in a grip strangely, almost terribly personal. There was surely never a place—though every place has its individuality—so pervasively, potently individual as this city. She exhaled her personality from the stones of her streets; one could not escape from it. Every breath drew in the warm air of the accumulated ages; every sound was the voice of Rome, barbaric in her complex crudity. Classic, medieval, modern, the name of each superimposed layer mattered nothing; Rome was still Rome; she must have been the same through all the ages.

Verney in these days grew to know the streets of the town as only the poor know them, with an intimate knowledge, not born of affection, but of expediency. Especially he knew the river districts—the Ghetto and all the squalid streets of the region of St. Angelo, the Campo Fiori and its adjacent web of streets. He knew the river shore, from Ponte Rotto up to Ponte S. Angelo; crossing them, he got closely acquainted with Trastevere. He knew that at the corner (at the right-hand side as you go up it) of the Via Santa Caterina, where it runs into the Via delle Botteghe Oscure (only a short walk from the Via del Teatro di Marcello), there is almost the cheapest *trattoria* in Rome. It was kept—is kept

now, I believe—by one Cecco. Cecco gives you more macaroni than you can eat, unless you are inordinately hungry, for five centesimi; for thirty he gives you a *frittura*; and if your imagination rises to further flights than these, he will rise to the emergency, with prices still proportionate. And while you eat Cecco talks. Cecco is a conversationalist of the first water. He is also a philosopher. He is not a Roman, but a Ligurian; his maxims of life are drawn from the Genoese hills. He has many such; Cecco is a veritable storehouse of dogmas, epigrammatically worded. He produces them apt to the occasion in hand with surprising readiness. You have scarce recovered from one proverb when another is launched at your head, Cecco meanwhile flying from place to place with the determination that nobody shall want for anything that five centesimi can buy.

Verney went to Cecco's at an unfashionable hour. The class to whom Cecco ministers are not of those who dine in the evening; Verney, preferring to eat when his day's work was done, had Cecco and Cecco's shop and Cecco's conversation for the most part to himself. Cecco and he made friends (with whom does not Cecco make friends), and Cecco unburdened himself of much theorising about life, and incidentally of a little good advice.

The second time Verney supped with him his quick penetration divined the indeterminate wavering of his customer after he had finished his macaroni when Cecco suggested, 'Una frittura, ne?' Cecco was accustomed to such wavering, and recognised the situation. He watched his customer with eyes of discerning sympathy, and after a moment startled him (Verney did not

know Cecco then) by remarking, with the cheerful optimism no less characteristic of him than his equally cheerful pessimism, 'Ogni domani porta il suo pane.' Verney turned upon him with swift, resentful contradiction, 'Indeed it doesn't'; then reddened at the discernment and his own acceptance of it, and finally remembered that such frank and kindly encouragement from one's host was a little out of the common way, and laughed. Cecco laughed too, cheerily, and Verney said, 'Ebbene, una frittura,' and followed Cecco curiously about with his eyes, surmising that his lot brought him much in contact with those to whom the morrow was, with more or less of opaqueness, veiled. After all, it was surely the final depth of futility to be ashamed of that veil. Verney tried to slough himself of that old trick of class—a class which, assuming a background, obviates mention of it.

Anyhow, his acquaintance with Cecco here began; he would turn into the *trattoria* at the corner henceforth with certain expectation of much converse. He did not always want the converse particularly; sometimes it bored him, and this he was at no pains to hide. One need not be afraid of snubbing Cecco, he is not sensitive. At other times his natural gregariousness sought relief from the crowded solitariness of the streets, and he drank Cecco's wine, and drew a listless amusement from Cecco and Cecco's circle of friends. From Cecco he gathered much scattered philosophy. Everyone cannot, said Cecco resignedly, have a house in the piazza, neither can everyone be next the priest at Mass. The contented man is he who can afford a little wine overnight, and trust the saints for the morrow. Youth, Cecco opined, is not to be

spoiled by overmuch toil. Let youth spend, and age pay at its leisure; for why pay till you have had your game? The most unlucky man Cecco had ever known (he had been a porter at Pegli) had spent a toilsome youth earning and earning, never spending a penny more than he was obliged, never marrying, never entertaining his friends, never giving himself or any other man a day's pleasure; but happy with the prospect before his eyes of a reposeful and well-provided-for old age, when he would stroll up and down the beach and smoke his pipe, and play games in the piazza, and never do a stroke of work. And, Cecco said tragically, this man, the poor unfortunate, died at the age of thirty-eight. He was killed on the line, and went to purgatory with nothing behind him but his painful and wasted youth.

'It is certainly a warning,' said Verney.

'And he had only himself to thank,' said Cecco. 'A man's misfortunes are usually no one's fault but his own. *Chi mal naviga, mal arriva*—bad sailors come ill to port.'

'There's something in that, I dare say,' said Verney.

As he went out again into the hot dusk of the evening, his steps on the paving-stones seemed to echo to that last phrase of Cecco's. *Chi mal naviga, mal arriva*. He had sailed so pitifully ill to arrive in these painfully unnavigable straits. Resentment stirred in him sullenly; he objected to doing things ill; it was an experience neither wanted nor welcome. Failure and disaster, to one of his calibre and his youth, are things to be quarrelled with, surlily resented.

In heavy moodiness he resented everything in this hot twilight of the day—the tedium of life, the sordid squalor of the desolate city,

the heavy, breathless oppression of a tired world.

He walked along aimlessly, because it was too hot to go in. The dusk deepened to darkness—a soft, brooding darkness that smothered the world like stifling blankets. Then a yellow brightness spread, a hazy, widening halo, in the east, and the moon rose. It reminded Verney of one of the round yellow cheeses in the little shop next the cobbler's. The smell, too, seemed a little the same, only mixed with it now was the faint, half-bitter breath of the night—the Roman night, which is like no other. It is that breath that gives men fever in the Roman summers.

The moon climbed up into the deep blue sky. The dim shadows of the streets suddenly stood out abruptly black and white, like an etching. All the clamorous life of the streets was suddenly revealed.

Verney, looking upon it, saw the only way in which reason and truth could paint it: the steep black streets, with the grotesque white streak of moonlight down the middle, where the great leaning houses let it in; the garish lights of the wine-shops, and the lounging groups outside; two men who fought with each other; a tousled woman shrieking something from a doorway; sleeping vagrants lying huddled in the shadows, seeking escape from the world's burden of great heat: and the moon leering down on it all like a great yellow cheese. It was more than ugly—it was ridiculous. It would not do for the public, who cherish a stupid old tradition that moonlight is beautiful. They would like, perhaps, their Forum, with the moon rising behind the Colosseum—the great Colosseum, at the full of

the moon an object well worthy a visit'—that just about expressed the public taste. That, however, they should not have—Verney was viciously resolved on that. He told himself that he loathed painting the Colosseum.

Then, seeing suddenly that he had got into Via Condotti, and was walking towards the Piazza di Spagna, he turned back. He disliked the Piazza di Spagna. He returned along the shore of the river, listlessly watching the moon silver the stale foam on the caked, cut mud of the naked banks. In front of him Ponte S. Angelo hung dreaming over the silver width, and behind it the ubiquitous dome, which the public loved, stood black against the deep blue sky.

Verney said he was sick of it.

He walked to his home through the Ghetto, and went in out of the hot, white night.

He did not go to bed on these nights till the dawn came, and a little cooled the air. He sat in his room and read by a small oil-lamp. He did not care very much about reading now, however; the heat (presumably) made one surprisingly dense of apprehension. It was difficult very often to grasp what the writer was driving at. Verney would often call him a fool, and fling the book away in disgust. People really should write intelligibly.

Then he would lean out into the warm, stifling darkness, and look eastward for the first paling of the sky, desiring morning; for though the days were bad, the nights were a good deal worse.

If he went to bed, sleep was elusive. The bed was in no way admirable; his head ached heavily. It ached now with dull persistence most of his days and nearly all his nights. Verney ascribed

it to the heat, and to the reducible minimum. It was a pity, because it necessitated the very plain thinking that Verney resented as being the reverse of what we have been taught by the common parlance to couple with the style of living he had adopted.

During wakeful nights one's thoughts, slipping the leash of will, pursue many quarries. Like poaching hounds, they have a preference for preserved ground, and usually refuse defiantly to be whipped to heel. The wise man, therefore, will tighten the leash firmly at the outset, and use all his authority to start the unruly hunters in an unharmed course.

Verney, lying with the hot sheets flung to his feet, laboured heavily in the wake of the errant soul of the public, transcribing in his mind memoranda for its pleasure. This was free ground, the public, a lawful and harmless quarry, and he would be fortunate if he succeeded in following undeviatingly that course. . . . Then, often not before daylight, he would fall into sleep, restless and broken.

Verney took to dreaming in these tired nights—grotesque dreams for the most part, of ugly places and strange, hot streets, and pitiless suns beating down. And the ugly places had to be beautified; they had to be smeared over with coat upon coat of rainbow-coloured paint, all over the streets and the houses and the caked river-shores, till they were fit to be looked at and praised by a cavilling, yet easily hoodwinked crowd. The most painful part of these dreams was the hot, foetid smell of the paint, that seemed to stifle him as he worked.

Occasionally, but this seldom, his dreams took him northward, to cool places on the fells; then,

with the wind and the gorse and the heather round him, he looked downwards at a village scrambling, grey and slumbrous, up a slope ; and upwards at the old monastery cresting the hill, with the sunset flaring on the little chapel's great rose window. Then he would whip the cool swirl of the brown beck for trout, or he would be sailing on Ullswater, girdled by the great heather hills, and tacking a little yacht against a southerly wind. Water and cool winds came always into this class of dream, to temporarily stay the fire in his hand. The worst of it was, no doubt, the waking, when it seemed very hot.

There were other dreams he had, of rather frequent recurrence. He dreamed with persistency of the sun rising over the Colosseum into the awed hush of a waiting world. Turning from the dawn in the sky, he would watch its cold, pure light fall on the profile turned half away from him. He knew its straight, firm lines by heart ; he knew, too, the careless, easy pose, the loose leaning of the arm ; but still he would look at it, seeking to know it better.

Then the whimsical laughter of the eyes would be bent upon him. There would follow sometimes no words at all but sometimes converse, long and intimate, if inconsequent. Even in dreams conversation with Rosamund Ilbert was bound to preserve a certain element of random irrelevance.

Verney came to know her thus, and in the heavy, dazed oppression of his brain at this time he grew to be strangely confused between dream and reality. He almost forgot how little he had known her, how trifling had been the things they had said to each other, how conventional had

been their intercourse. The dawn light in his dreams transcended all poor conventionalities; words were not needed; she understood, and was pitifully sorry. There the matter ended, for there was what set her graciously alone, apart from the rest of the world.

Verney in his dreams thanked her for her great comprehension; waking, he still thanked her, but with the bitter flush of resentful shame.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE PRIEST'S JOB

ALL through the latter part of August, Verney heard from Hummel, with increasing emphasis in the reiteration, that he did not paint well. He was willing to accept the accusation; he thought it probable, though he himself seemed to have no nice discrimination left in these matters, that he painted extremely badly. His own postcards certainly struck him as singularly unedifying; he laughed when he saw them reproduced, in rows, in Hummel's shop.

'Are they horribly bad?' he inquired, a little wistfully, of Valerio, who was with him one afternoon.

That young gentleman regarded them with an embarrassed shrug, then turned away delicately.

'Per Bacco!' he commented, then looked at his friend a little curiously. 'What's happened to you, caro? You've been overworking, *ne*? This infernal town in this weather is the devil! You look ill.'

'I'm not ill,' said Verney crossly; 'it's the damned weather, that's all.'

On the twenty-ninth of August, Hummel came to the point, and informed him that his services would no longer be required.

'It is not the right season for the cards,' he explained; 'and besides that, my friend, you do

not paint well enoff. Ve can buy no more of your paintings: they vill bring discredit on my shop, to show such sketches in the windows.'

He fixed a severe eye on the bored and listless young man. Verney did not present a markedly attractive or reputable appearance in these days; always gaunt and pale, he had grown much gaunter and paler in these past months; his eyes were dull, and heavy shadows lay under them; his face seemed all chin and dark, overhanging brows. His clothes were not very well brushed, and hung a little loose, with an air of rather dusty dishevelment; neither was his expression particularly pleasant. Hummel thought it probable that he drank.

'You understand?' he finished, a little sharply.

Verney understood, and departed from Hummel's presence, to see him no more.

His first reflection, as he went down the street, was that now he had free permission to regard Rome frankly and truthfully, in all her native hideousness. He need no longer strive to look at her with the eyes of Hummel and of Hummel's 'poblic.' The ugly raw ruins, with their horrible smell of excavations and newly-turned earth, and the squalid streets, might now be frankly distasteful, and need not be contemplated from morning till night. He had no desire left now to paint them as they were; that revenge, as he had foreseen, would have no savour. He desired simply to leave them to themselves.

It was in a way a relief that his goods had become so obviously unmarketable; it was no use thinking of offering them elsewhere; he did not, as Hummel said, paint well enough.

He went that evening to Cecco's. He was in a mood for Cecco—a mood of holiday hilarity.

Cecco found him unusually sociable, and recklessly extravagant; he ordered minestra and a *frittura* to follow (though he found that he was not so hungry as he would have liked to be in order to do due justice to the occasion), and a mezzo-litro of Chianti. Cecco beamed upon him.

'And how does the painting go?' he inquired, leaning his two hands on the table amicably.

'Talk to me no more of painting,' said Verney. 'I shall never paint again; I don't like painting. Your vile city may go unpainted for me.'

'Ah!'—Cecco stepped backwards and jerked his head in surprised interest—'you've come in for a fortune, perhaps?'

'No, I have not; quite the contrary.'

'You've won on the lotto, then?'

'No; it's a poor thing, your lotto. I shall give it up; I always lose on it.'

Cecco renounced the problem.

'You've taken up some new life, I suppose?' he concluded, and removed Verney's plate.

Verney turned upon him resentfully.

'Why should I take up a new life?' he demanded, with querulous anger. 'It's you who say it's waste of time to spend one's youth in work. So it is; I quite agree with you.'

Cecco smiled with tolerance.

'But it's better to make baskets to-day,' he observed, 'than to beg on the steps to-morrow.'

'I can't make baskets,' Verney said shortly, 'and I've no intention of begging on the steps; the summer isn't the begging season. And it doesn't appear to me that you're very consistent. What about your friend the porter, who so wasted his youth?'

'Ah yes, povero disgraziato!' Cecco became reminiscently compassionate.

‘Every to-morrow brings its bread,’ said Verney, still wrathful, and paid his reckless bill and went out.

Cecco followed him with his eyes and shrugged a light shrug of compassion.

‘Povero disgraziato!’ he murmured, not thinking now of the porter of Pegli.

Verney, still wrathfully asserting to himself that he was not going to waste his youth any further, and railing against Cecco, who had tried to spoil his holiday, climbed his steep stairs and cannoned against his friend the priest, who was coming down them with many sighs relevant to their steep obscurity and stifling air.

‘Ah, il mio figliuolo inglese!’ he remarked, recovering from the shock of violent contact with praiseworthy serenity. ‘I have been to see your friend, the poor young fool above. He’s very ill; I fear he may not recover. But he will have none of me at present; I think, though, he will send for me at the last, and escape the devil after all. Meanwhile the doctor is more to the point. And now, my friend, how is life progressing with you?’ His shrewd, kind eyes scanned the young man’s face in the gloom. ‘You are happy?’ he deduced.

‘I have stopped painting,’ said Verney simply, the adequacy of his reply in no way lessened by the fact that he had always told the priest that his trade interested him immensely.

He had forgotten that; he had somehow forgotten everything to-night, one thing alone rising out of the hot, confused haziness of his mind—he had stopped painting.

‘Ah!’—the priest looked at him gently—‘that pleases you?’

‘Yes,’ said Verney, with surprise that he should

need to inform anyone of such a matter of course. 'I don't like painting, you know; I don't paint well enough.' Vaguely he repeated Hummel's phrase.

'And what now?' inquired the priest.

Verney leaned defiantly back against the rough wall.

'Nothing now,' he said, with the half-querulous, challenging defiance of a child—'nothing.'

'Ebbene!' said the priest, after a moment. 'But if you want some teaching, for instance—I heard of something only the other day; I have been meaning to tell you of it. But you don't want work?'

Verney shook his head. He did not want work. He disliked the thought of work so much that the mention of it made him angry. If it had been anyone but the priest, he would have broken out upon him in his wrath. Why should people all come and spoil his holiday by suggesting work for him? It was abominably intrusive and stupid.

He said a hasty good-night, and went upstairs. But the hot air of his room smote him in the face as he entered, and he fell back with a deep breath of distaste. He did not wish to go and stifle indoors to-night. He went down the steps again, and out into the street—into the city of white moonlight and black shadows. It had taken a new air to-night; it was no longer a grim task-master, but a great place of holiday—a silly, meaningless black-and-white labyrinth, through which one loafed with infinite leisure, with the moon leering down like a yellow wedge of cheese. The very paving of the streets had taken a new character—an airy quality of unsubstantiality, that made walking an oddly new process, much

lighter than usual, and vaguely like treading a ship's deck in a slightly heaving sea.

Verney walked through a good many streets that night. At every street-corner and outside every café he looked the groups of loungers in the face defiantly, because he too could lounge with the best of them now his holiday time had come. He stopped at a café once to drink some wine—the night was oddly hot and thirsty—but on feeling in his pockets, he found he had no money. After that he went home to bed.

He had then the worst night he had had yet. The weight as of many blankets lay upon him, smothering him hotly; he gasped for breath beneath their folds, but they were as lead, and would not be thrown off. All night he painted, painted, till he was sick of the terrible smell and sight of it; his holiday had not availed to free him from that. He did not sleep, but daubed away tube after tube of horrible paint—mostly black and white—with wide, staring eyes.

The hot dawn came and found him doing it; then he turned impatiently on his side, away from the ghastly pale light, and buried his face in his arm to shut it out.

When the sun was high in the sky he slept—a restless, dream-broken sleep, from which he woke after a couple of hours to view the world wearily, but with a more sane soberness.

‘Of course,’ he muttered, turning heavy eyes on the hot day, ‘I shall have to crawl to the priest, and pick up his beastly job.’

He got up listlessly and wearily, and went out into the baked streets. They had stopped heaving under him this morning, only the smell and the aching glare of them made him feel sick as he walked.

His friend the priest had just finished breakfast. Verney came in and sat down rather suddenly by the door.

'What's your job?' he inquired languidly in English; then, at the puzzled look on the round face, recollected himself, and summoned his Italian with an effort. 'I beg your pardon. The fact is, I made a mistake last night; I hadn't thought it over sufficiently. I do want work, of course. You said something about having heard of something. . . .'

The *parroco* nodded. He looked in no way surprised. But he looked rather hard at Verney, who, it must be said, was talking exceedingly bad Italian.

'It is some teaching work,' he said, after a pause. 'A family staying at Albano; their name is Azzareto. They have a boy of fifteen, and they wish that he should spend his holidays in learning English. I was told of them,' he added, 'by some friends of yours—the Ilberts. They thought that you might care to undertake it.'

'The Ilberts? . . . You know them, then?'

The fact somehow made Verney feel an increased dizziness.

'Why, yes; they are friends of mine. I saw them at Albano not long since. We talked of you.'

Verney nodded. His mind groped vaguely round the words, finding in them strangeness; yet he felt no particular surprise. He realized that there was matter to ponder over, but deferred the pondering for awhile.

'We both,' continued the *parroco*, 'thought this might suit you. I said I would mention it to you. You will pardon the liberty?'

'I am very grateful,' said Verney mechanically.

'Ought I to write, then, or go and see them? Or—or what?'

The priest looked at him in silence for a moment, his finger-tips meditatively together.

'Are you sure,' he said, 'that you want to undertake it?'

'I suppose so,' said Verney listlessly. 'If they'll have me, that is. I dare say they won't.'

'You would have to go and see them, then, of course,' the priest said, watching him thoughtfully. 'I think it probable that they would be very glad to get you. But——' He broke off and pursed up his lips a little. 'I'm afraid you aren't well, my friend.'

'Perfectly,' said Verney, moving impatiently. 'Only this weather——'

His eyes lacked their customary straight regard; they shifted heavily from place to place.

'Ah!' said the priest, 'the weather—yes. It is certainly not pleasant weather.'

The conversation languished a little. Verney tried to remember what he was waiting for. He remembered after a moment.

'The address,' he said. 'If you would be kind enough to give me the address——'

'Ah, yes, to be sure, the address. It is Signor Azzareto, and he is staying in the Palazzo Invrea. You will write to him about it, then?'

'I suppose so,' said Verney.

He rose to go. He did not care for the sight of the remnants of coffee and rolls on the table; he wondered how anyone could eat in such hot weather, and averted his eyes.

The priest watched him steadily; his pursed mouth grew smaller and smaller.

'Figliuolo mio, you had better go home to bed,' he remarked suddenly.

Verney stared at him and laughed uncertainly. He thought the *parroco* had gone off his head.

'Just after breakfast?' he said with sarcasm, though the *parroco's* breakfast was the only breakfast in the case.

The priest nodded.

'Sicuro,' he said; 'just after breakfast, as you say.'

Verney turned away impatiently.

'Good-bye,' he said, and went out.

The good priest sat with his finger-tips together, and nodded his head thoughtfully several times.

'I must go and see after him,' he observed, 'this afternoon. I think my friend the doctor may find he has two cases to visit before long at 19, Via del Teatro. And he meditates giving English lessons!' he ended, chuckling.

Verney sat down to indite a letter to Signor Azzareto at the Palazzo Invrea. He spent half an hour over it. At the end of that time he threw down his much-bitten pen and crumpled the scattered fragments of paper into a ball, and got up angrily.

'What makes me such a hopeless ass?' he demanded querulously, running his fingers impatiently through his damp hair. 'I must go and see him, then, I suppose, though I don't want to go to the confounded place. He'll think me a raving lunatic if I write. How infernally stupid this weather makes one!'

It was annoying, because it meant the expenditure of one franc sixty on the railway fare.

'I'm hanged if I walk it,' said Verney emphatically to himself. 'I'll walk back, though, when it's cooler.'

Even the three miles' walk up from La Cecchina Station to Albano was irritating in the late

afternoon heat. Verney found himself in the long white town at about six o'clock. He walked up the badly-paved street listlessly, looking from side to side among the hotels and villas for his palace. It was a poor town enough, he decided, and wondered why people came here for their summer. There seemed to him to be a good many visitors about. When he saw anyone in the distance who wore anything of an English air, his step became suddenly furtive. He did not like walking through Albano. He began to feel something of the nervous irritation that he had not felt in Rome for the last three months. In Rome, with all its faults, one was fairly safe—in summer.

The Palazzo Invrea he found to be a large, ugly, biscuit-coloured edifice, near the end of the street, the sort of place that is let in apartments to Romans and strangers during the summer months. Verney was shown, just when the hot sun above and the hot street below had brought him to a point when he swore he would bear it no longer, into a great cool hall, and ushered up the flight of wide marble steps into a great, spacious, gilded, bare reception-room. There he waited, staring dreamily at the gorgeously painted ceiling and at the stately ladies and gentlemen who looked down at him from the walls. It was marvellously cool after the hot street. The coolness made him want to go to sleep, because it had not been cool enough to sleep for so long. As he was meditating this move someone came in, a rather stout lady in black silk. Verney dreamily listened to the creaking of it as she came across the large room towards him.

She had his card in her hand, and smiled an

affable smile, and said something. Verney did not listen much; he was listening to her dress, which still creaked, though she had stopped walking. Then she said something else, and looked at him expectantly, with a polite smile, and he became suddenly aware that it was his turn to speak. He remembered all about it then—he had to make business arrangements, state his qualifications, mention the priest. He pulled himself together and became business-like suddenly.

‘I believe you wish for someone to give English lessons to your son,’ he said slowly and carefully.

But she gazed at him and shook her head.

‘Non capisco inglese,’ she said.

Verney started a little. He had not known he was speaking in English.

‘Scusi, signora,’ he said, then stammered a little, and got no further.

He could not for the life of him remember the Italian for ‘You wish your son to have English lessons.’ She waited for a moment, then took up the conversation herself.

‘You were mentioned to us,’ she said, ‘by the Signorina Ilbert. You can teach English, can you not?’

She waited again. Verney said nothing at all, he only grew a hot crimson from brow to chin. He could not answer her; he did not know what she was talking about. People should not talk in unknown tongues; it was abominably, grossly uncourteous.

The stout lady was looking at the hot, frowning face with a little bewilderment.

‘Perhaps you don’t speak Italian very well?’ she queried.

Verney understood that. It made him angry. He stammered after words to show her she was mistaken. His stammering died into silence—an oppressive silence.

‘My son,’ said Signora Azzareto, after the silence had lasted a moment or two, ‘knows no English at all. I’m afraid you will hardly be able to make him understand you.’ She hesitated for a moment, then gave a little shrug of her ample shoulders. ‘You don’t speak our language, I’m afraid, Signor—Russ.’

Verney stood in silence before her. It was not worth while to try any more to undeceive her; it was too much of an effort, and he was too sleepy. Besides, he could not remember any words with which to tell her that he spoke Italian admirably. It was absurd of her to know no English.

‘I regret,’ she said, ‘that we shall not be able to make an arrangement together; but, you see, it would not quite do.’

She waited, looking a little embarrassed.

It dawned upon Verney’s apprehension that the interview was at an end. He bowed and turned away. The expanse of slippery marble floor between him and the door wore a perilous aspect as he embarked upon it; but he reached the door all right, and got safely out on to the stairs, which he descended carefully, his hand on the marble rail, because he was so sleepy that he might at any moment fall down and go to sleep where he was.

When he was half-way down he met Miss Ilbert coming up. He leaned against the rail that she might pass, but she did not pass. She stopped and held out her hand.

He said hastily, lest she should suspect him of having been trying to intrude on her and

her family—he supposed they were staying here:

‘I’ve been to see Signora Azzareto; but I don’t speak Italian, you see, so it wouldn’t do.’

‘I see,’ she said, looking at him. ‘And now you’re coming to see us. We speak English, you know, so it will do quite nicely.’

She was laughing at him, he knew, as she always did. He leaned back against the marble rail.

‘No,’ he said simply, ‘I’m not. I’m going back to Rome.’

‘But I’m afraid,’ she said, rather gently, ‘that you’ve missed the last train. Do you know, you’d much better come up and see us, like a nicely disposed person. Mother ’ll be so pleased.’

He stood there and looked at her as she stood on the step above him, leaning a little on the marble rail, careless, gracious, with eyes that took everything for granted, and did not laugh at all. He seemed to detect, indeed, in her eyes a certain grave attention.

He desired greatly to get away, because he had an inkling that he might make a fool of himself somehow to-day; it was so hot, and he was so sleepy, and he had forgotten all his Italian.

‘I’m going home,’ he stammered, and turned from her, and ran swiftly downstairs and across the long hall and out into the street.

CHAPTER XIX

THE APPIAN WAY

WHEN he had got safely out of the gates of Albano, Verney, who had walked very quickly through the town, for fear the Ilberts should come after him and make him stay to dinner, or something equally unfaceable, slackened his pace, and looked round him. He had a fifteen-mile walk before him. He did not mind particularly now; it was so much cooler now the sun was lower. The sun appeared to be nearly setting. With a professional eye Verney observed the view. He came to the conclusion that the public would like it. It was a pity he had not got his painting things with him; it was an opportunity sadly wasted. He could not think how he came to have forgotten them. He wondered if he could do it from memory—the great burnt sea of the Campagna spreading in vast purple waves beneath the flaming sky, bounded to the right by the faint transparency of Soracte, to the left by the deeper purple of the line of sea. Rome, too, was well seen from this height—a quaint, little, stumpy crowd of domes, ludicrously alone in the huge plain, like a towered and turreted ship moored in a great purple sea.

Towards the ship and the sunset the Appian Way dipped down from the Alban hills, then

clove a straight white path through the misty waters. Verney watched it till it lost itself in the purple waste. He must travel along it to that city of sunset.

'It's a little too good for the public,' he said. 'They shan't have it.'

Then he remembered something Hummel had once wanted him to do. He had refused, because he had not wished to go to Albano or anywhere near it.

Hummel had said, 'Paint the Lake of Albano on a fine day—blue water and Castel Gandolfo reflected in it, and make your reflections bright and clear.'

It was a little late, perhaps, this evening, but in this clear flame of sunset light the water and its reflected city could not but make an effective appeal to the public, who liked their red sky.

Verney left the Appian Way, and turned to the right, up an ilex-shaded avenue. He followed it till it led him to the lip of the crater. From thence he looked down upon the oval of still waters, from which the flame that had made them as a sheet of red-hot metal was dying slowly, leaving them a grey, still purple, like the eastern sky, under the shadowing fringe of trees.

Castel Gandolfo, clambering steeply up to a crest, stood against the western flame, like a piled mountain crag; and its shadow, a twin city, slept in purple stillness at its feet.

Far to the east stretched the Alban hills, and Rocca di Papa gleamed, a white dim jewel, set in their misty crown.

'Oh, the public,' said Verney; 'the damned public! I suppose they must have it.'

Then he remembered suddenly that it had been no good his coming; he had not got his

things with him; and he was relieved at the discovery. The prey of the public had, for once, escaped its doom.

He turned back into the dim woods, where the dark, roofing ilexes shut him into a purple gloom. But through the tall trunks he could still see the red burning of the sky. It made his eyes ache; he did not want to go out into the open and meet it face to face. Also, he was very sleepy. He sat down in the ilex wood, and rested his head on his hands.

Over the Campagna the red flush brooded and died.

* * * * *

Verney woke to consciousness twice that night. Once the rising moon found its way through the roofing trees, and lay full on his face; he stirred then uneasily, and shifted a little into the shadow of a tree. He lay for a little then, and listened to a cicada which was chirping very loudly close to him, and watched the fire-flies beneath half-closed lids before he slid again into dreams. He did not exactly sleep; it was not, at least, sleep in the usual definition of the term; rather a long, hazy, half-waking dream, which was infinitely restful. He never lost the sense of the sweet air, which seemed to come laden with the breath of many groves of lemons and gardens of warm vines. He knew all the night that the pines and cypresses and ilexes above his head were murmuring perpetually, though it seemed no wind stirred; he knew the cicada were chirping a sleepy good-night in the trees till they wearied and were still; he heard, far-off, the melancholy chorus of the frogs, who lift sad voices all the night through, and the plaintive crying of the

owls from tomb to tomb. He was aware of the climbing silver moon, whose white light lay on the moss carpet between the close shadows of the trees. He watched the shadows creeping round with listless, dreaming eyes, and moved when the white light fell on his face and broke his dreams.

It seemed to him good to be there; he felt, without conscious recollection, as if he had been for a very long time in a hot prison, and had at last escaped into the cool, scented shadow of this restful night.

The second time he woke completely it was because a mosquito had bitten him on the wrist. He started a little, and opened resentful eyes. The night still lay sweetly on the world, the moon's bright patches still silvered the ground between the trees; but there was a greater quietness than in the earlier night, and less warmth in the scented air.

Verney shivered a little and sat up. He felt a little damp and chilled, except his head, which was burning hotly. He did not wish to slip into dreams again; he returned slowly to waking life, and remembered that it might be advisable to go home. He had not the least idea what the time was; some time in the night, obviously, he observed, a little fatuously, looking up at the stars through the roofing trees. It might be well, perhaps, to make his journey to Rome before the heat of the day.

He got up stiffly, and stumbled along the path through the wood. He felt rather cross, for he had liked his night, and he felt no desire to walk fifteen miles back to the room in the Via del Teatro di Marcello.

He came out of the ilex wood into a vineyard

and through the vineyard into an olive garden, and so up on to the Appian Way.

Now he saw—he had been shut from the realization before by the dim enclosing gloom of the ilex wood—that the world was a wonderful glory of white moonlight. It lay in great, still spaces; the Campagna was a misty, swelling sea of silver grey. One could discern the whole of it in that lucid breadth of light—all across, from Soracte to the sea, a great, still plain, its burnt desolation softened by the large mysticism of the white moon, which at once elucidated and drew a tender veil. It hid no form: the aqueducts marched, mile on mile, darkly out of the west, defined against the grey background in their shattered, ghostly pride; the darkness of broken tombs studded the plain like ships in a silver sea; dark ranks of vines, black cypresses, and grey olives like pale smoke, stood up delicately under the large moon. Far to the left a long sweep of silver, more metallic and illumined than the silver of the plains, lit the bounds of the world with still water.

And the Appian Way, cutting palely through the dim waste, melted far off into faint obscurity, till it found at last its home in the dim dark city in the west, whose lights sparkled faintly like distant fire-flies.

The stars alone would have lit the night. They were large, tender, changefully resplendent, glowing from down the immensity of their deep blue vault. When the large moon had set—and it was already low in the west—the stars would still light the Appian Way.

Verney came down from the Alban hills. The road dropped abruptly between low white walls, guarded by dark ranks of pines. Their shadows

lay black upon the white road. A few fire-flies still lit the gardens and vineyards by the roadside. Their fewness told Verney that the dawn was not far off.

He knew it without that by the soft coolness of the air. Dawn would come, bearing its burden of the next hot day, before he was well set upon his road. He did not mind the day coming. The night was an odd dream; with the day he supposed he should wake up, and his ideas would become more coherent. He wanted to wake up. He had read somewhere not long ago of someone in just his circumstances—someone who had, like him, '*rêves qui se lassent.*' He groped vaguely after the words of that other man, who must have been walking along the Appian Way under the large setting moon, and found a few of them. Once found, they beat in his brain like hammers; he wished he could forget them.

'Moi, j'attends un peu de réveil'—

his steps echoed on the white road—

'Moi, j'attends que le sommeil passe ;
Moi, j'attends un peu de soleil,
Sur mes mains que la lune glace.'

Odd that another man should have discovered how the moon froze one's hands, as one walked in a dream. That man must certainly have followed the Appian Way beneath the moon, walking between the great broken dwellings of the dead.

He stopped once, opposite the massive block of a ruined tomb. The public would like that. He would make them a postcard of it. Then he became aware of his empty hands, and remembered again, what he kept forgetting, that he had

not brought his things. Also, he had a vague recollection of somebody who had said to him, 'You do not paint well enough,' in some far-back age (if anyone had told him it was only yesterday—the day before yesterday, perhaps, as the dawn was coming—he would have laughed contemptuous incredulity).

He did not paint well enough.

Someone else had said that he did not speak Italian well enough. It was quite true; he could do nothing at all well, being so inept and so oddly sleepy beneath the freezing moon. He could do nothing well; he could not earn his living, or answer when he was spoken to, and he did not wish to. It was so much simpler merely to walk on and on while the moon set. The moon and he were both sinking down into the grey plains; soon they would not see each other at all.

That came to pass when he was a little past the thirteenth milestone from Rome. The silver moonlight died from the world, leaving only the great mild stars, and the dim plains, and the white road that glimmered through them.

The night grew grey and more grey. It was no longer deep blue, set with golden jewels; the stars paled in a paling sky.

There was born a strange new world, grey and dim; the ranks of aqueducts, veiled by the setting of the moon, marched out again, like blurred, faint ghosts.

Rome was gone wholly; the plains had drowned her. Verney scanned the grey width in vain. The plains had taken the line of sea, too. Nothing remained but the great dim waste, set here with a broken tomb, there with a square tower, with now and then the blur of an olive farm or vine-

yard, and always the long striding of the aqueducts out of the dark west.

Verney was glad he faced the west. He suspected that behind him the day would soon be coming in gold—not quite behind him, though, but to his right. He could turn his head away from it when it came. He hated to see the birth of the day.

The sepulchres clustered closer along his way as he came down to the plains.

He came to Le Frattocchie, where the old and new ways join. From there he looked down two grey roads: one guarded on either side by the rows of mouldered tombs, close set; the other, to the right, took the aqueduct for its line of march. Verney sat down on a block of stone by the roadside, and considered the question, resting his chin on his hand. It needed so much consideration; he could not properly bring his mind to bear upon it, being able to think of nothing but—

‘Moi, j’attends un peu de réveil,
Moi, j’attends que le sommeil passe ;
Moi, j’attends un peu de soleil,
Sur mes mains que la lune lace.’

He did not see that behind him the day was coming—blue-grey melting to pure gold, above the broken ghosts of the aqueducts. The Alban hills were turning from dim, dark shadows to peaks transparently blue. The white mountain towns, pale jewels set in a sapphire chain, gleamed out to meet the dawn.

Verney, staring over the grey plains, thought on a sudden of running water—water that murmured perpetually at the bottom of a grey stone well; the lip of the well was cut into deep scars by the rope-dragging of a thousand years, and

the water rose and sang always at the bottom. He felt a keen, overmastering desire for that place; it was cool, he remembered, and bright, and there was always in it the singing, gurgling water.

He exerted the few wits he had, and remembered that one did not reach that place by the mouldering street of the dead; one followed the aqueduct. He got up, and took the road of the aqueduct. It bent at first to the right, and the blue dawn broke upon his eyes. It reminded him of the way the dawn came behind the Colosseum. . . . Only here instead was a broken chain of arches, and far away the blue hills, with the white cities all in a climbing row, gleaming out to meet the morning—Frascati, Grotta Ferrata, the long climbing line of Marino, Castel Gandolfo on a peak, Albano below, and, higher than them all, poised like an eagle's nest just below the blue peak of Monte Cavo, Rocca di Papa caught the white dawn.

Verney turned from the hills and followed the road through the grey plain. It was very still, that pure twilight before the rising of the sun—very still and very grey; dim grey land, grey shattered arches to the right, grey blocks of tombs to the left, grey olives blurring the plain, faint grey western sky, and the grey road running to Rome. And always the grey lightened and brightened and turned more blue as the minutes passed, till one saw of a sudden that one walked under a pale, pure blue sky through a dim blue plain.

That sea-blueness of the plain was a thing seen and vanished, as it were, in a moment; one caught the pure tinge, then straightway saw the burnt land emerge, as the light grew, into the golden-

brown desolation of late summer—a land whose heart has been burnt out by the fierce suns of months.

'Ah, bon Dieu, quelle tristesse!' Verney might have echoed the disgusted cry of the Comte d'Erfeuil, only he was thinking of nothing but the white road before him, and the sun, which he knew would presently climb up behind him, burning the road and the plains.

There was an infinite, tired desolation on the land, now that morning was breaking on it; it seemed as if summer had hurt it to death, leaving it lying in still, sad despondency, broken by no intruding feet. Verney saw no farms as he walked, no houses, no trees—nothing but the waves of burnt land and its sad grey tombs.

Behind him the sun, sending its sea of pure gold before it, climbed above the blue hills into the waiting sky, and mounted up and up.

Wheels and the jingling of bells broke the hush of the morning. A wine-cart crawled leisurely by; its driver, half asleep, yawned over the loose reins. Verney looked for the little dog that should have barked behind on the casks, but there was no little dog. The absence of the little dog made him vaguely resentful. One could not paint a wine-cart without him; the public insisted on their little dog. One might as well do the river without St. Peter's, or the steps of Trinita dei Monti without models. Most assuredly it was a deficient wine-cart.

It proved the forerunner of a line of traffic. The hush was broken up by cart-wheels, the light hurry of biroccini, the slow tread of oxen, the jangling of bells. From the farms of the hills and plains peasants were bringing in their provender to Rome—wine, vegetables, and fruit—for

the morning's marketing. Verney thought of asking for a lift, but remembered that he did not speak Italian well enough, and could not.

Meanwhile his feet trod the road very lightly; he felt rather as if he had air-balloons tied to his feet. It was an odd sensation, and made him feel a little giddy. The road was hot under his feet as the day grew; he had known it would be. The sun was hot on his head; when he breathed he seemed to draw in draughts of old, stale dust. He wished very much that he was in a wine-cart, under a gaily-painted hood. It seemed that one could go to sleep quite comfortably under the hood; one's horse appeared to know the road at least as well as his driver. That must be very pleasant, Verney reflected.

There seemed at one part of the road to have been an accident with some hundreds of extremely bad eggs. Verney could only account for the atmosphere in that way—some egg-cart, whose driver had fallen asleep, and whose horse had run away, perhaps. Serve him right, for taking such bad eggs to market! But they should not have left the eggs about to remind passers-by so forcibly of laboratory experiments. It made Verney angry; he hurried by.

Soon after this a road branched off to the right, leading back towards the hills—to Marino and the other white places. Verney paused; he thought of the cool gloom of the ilex-wood, and of Castel Gandolfo shadowed in still water. He yearned after them, traversing this hot plain. For many miles before him his straight white road cut through the burnt country to the prison-house at the end. The white cities in the blue hills gleamed to beckon him back to them.

Then he remembered how the water sang and

musically choked always at the bottom of a grey stone well.

He followed his road westward.

As the day grew the heat made him consumingly thirsty. He came to an *osteria* by the wayside, with a withered, sun-scorched bough hanging outside it. It looked as if it might be cool inside, though one could not see, as the door was at the top of an outside flight of stone steps. It was called the Osteria Ponte Lungo. Verney climbed the steps and went in, into the cool dark room that smelt of sour wine, and sat down on a bench. He leaned back against the rough white wall, and closed his eyes to forget the glaring road and the burnt plains.

It seemed a long time before anyone came to him. When they did he ordered wine, feeling pleased that he remembered the words for it. It had been a gross libel on him to say that he could not talk Italian; he could demand a *fojetta* of Chianti with hardly a pause for reflection.

As he drank it he felt a little surprise that he wanted nothing to eat; it seemed to him a long time since he had eaten, though he could not remember exactly when it was. Not yesterday, certainly; he had been too sleepy yesterday, and had had too much to do. It was certainly an economy that he was not hungry.

He leaned his elbows on the table and his forehead on his hands, and thought what an oddly cold place a wineshop was. He wanted to stay there a long time, out of the hot glare of the sun. . . .

He found his way into cool ilex-woods, and was wandering there, shut from the white moon into a dim world of fragrance and gloom, when he was summoned back by a sharp voice calling him. He

looked up resentfully. He did not understand all the innkeeper said, but gathered that they were busy in the inn, and that he must pay and go.

He wondered vaguely, as he felt in his pockets for coins, how long he had been there. It might have been any time from ten minutes to two hours. He came down the steps into the fierce beating of the sun, and took the road. The hot smell of the dust caught him by the throat.

He did not know how far he was from Rome, but, if it had not been for the obsession of the singing water, he would have gone no further, but have stopped there by the roadside. The water called him imperiously; it made the pains of the road worth while.

He saw Rome again now, the plains had restored her. From the hills she had been as a ship adrift in the middle of a great water, lonely and lost. The waters had submerged her, to restore her in a more fitting pride, for now she dominated the horizon which had swamped her. Faint and dreamlike she stood at first against the quivering transparency of the sky—a mirage city with a dreaming dome. The imperiousness of the dome grew; it became delicately dominating, pencilled in blue upon the faint blue sky. It became a beacon, lording it over the great city and the wide plains, calling wayfarers to its shelter.

Verney knew it for what it was—the guardian of a mighty prison; but it symbolized also to him running water, so he kept his eyes upon it and walked.

Out of the haze of the hot air the line of great tombs broke, guarding the Old Appian Way. Some of them Verney had made into postcards for Hummel: the Casale Rotondo, with its olive

farm; the Torre di Selce on its great sepulchre base; Cæcilia Metella's tomb, which Hummel had said people liked because it reminded them of pleasant days with the hounds. These gave him as he saw them an uneasy feeling of discomfort.

But for the most part he saw neither the tombs on the left nor the aqueduct on the right, nor the great burnt plains, but only the wooden fencing that bordered the way, and the thistles and yellow fennel and coarse grass that grew up round it, and the hot white dust on the road, and, when he looked up, the blue summoning dome that pointed the way.

He supposed the miles passed; he did not know; there was nothing to mark them but the growingly insistent command of the blue dome.

The wooden fencing gave place to walls, low and white. They shut one in as the white walls of the quay shut in the Tiber, thought Verney. Houses began, and inns. Verney would have gone into another inn, but he had no money. The coins he had found at the Osteria Ponte Lungo had been his last, apparently; besides, it was, perhaps, simpler now to walk on, and not to have to make one's self understood by people of the inconceivable stupidity which marked those who spoke Italian.

The close cobbling of the road was bad to walk upon. The cartwheels upon them made a horrible grating rattle. The smell of the dust was bitter, stifling . . .

A beggar waited for Verney at the corner—an inglese is an inglese always, however dishevelled—and requested 'un soldo.' Verney stared at him and laughed a little. It seemed to him infinitely funny that anyone should ask halfpence

of him ; if he had any halfpence, of course he would spend them on wine at the next inn.

The city and the mastering dome grew to an overshadowing greatness. To the left, hugely sinister, a great ruin loomed into view, darkening the sky.

Then a bend of the road brought the walls of Rome in sight, stretching in their weather-beaten, rusty pride to right and left, the walls of the prison, where one served the public in hot streets.

Verney leaned for a minute against the white walls and wondered dreamily if he should reach that prison. He seemed to be going so very slowly ; each step now was a strange, self-conscious effort. He had to think very hard of the water in the grey well before he could drag himself on again. It was there ; he knew it was singing and gurgling there, somewhere inside the prison walls. He fixed his eyes straight ahead to where the little hole in the brown wall gaped to let him through at the end of the long white road.

It was a long time before he reached the hole, because he went so slowly, and stopped several times on the way. He was vaguely afraid that it would close up before it let him through ; but it did not ; it let him through, when he reached it, into the piazza, whose broad glare of scorched whiteness beat up into his eyes. A strange place to have cool running water concealed in the middle of it. Verney was not to be put off in this matter of the water. His eyes turned to the left. Across the white piazza the Mother and Head of all Churches of the City and of the World waited for him. He went towards her. He crossed the piazza a trifle unsteadily. He was trying to count the row of large saints who stood

on the balustrade of the church against the dazzling blue. He could not count them. He always got mixed at the fourth from the end, and had to begin again.

‘About a hundred and three, I should think,’ said Verney, and renounced the problem.

When he stood at the bottom of the flight of wide steps, and the great façade loomed above him, he stopped and sighed a little. There seemed to be a great many steps; the Mother and Head of all the Churches stood horribly high.

He began the ascent. Each step was a work of art, to be carefully and elaborately executed. There were always steps in this city, he remembered—interminable steps, which one climbed in the hot darkness. These steps were not dark, however; the bright luminousness of them hurt him.

It was with the feeling of something difficult cleverly achieved that he climbed the top step, and stood outside the great leather curtain. The next task was to lift the curtain aside. This was not easy; it was absurdly heavy; but he managed it, and stepped in through the open bronze door.

Then it was again as if the ilex-woods closed about him, shutting him into a dim, cool gloom, heavy with the sweet odorousness of the woods, fragrant with still winds that had passed over many groves of lemons and thickets of dark pines and vine-gardens warm in the sun.

Verney could not see much in the gloom, after the whiteness of the day outside; but he looked down through dim forests of pillars into the glooming twilight, and knew that his water sang there somewhere in a little bright courtyard beyond the dimness of the forest.

He stumbled into the twilight, and its heavy sweetness came odorously about him, lying upon

his senses, making him strangely dreamy. The glade between the tall trunks was of an infinite length. Here and there there were kneeling figures by the wayside. Verney saw them in a dream, and wondered what they did there in his forest.

He went on through the dimness, past many little side recesses, but none of them were his court of water; that came at the very end. He saw it before he came to it, and saw that the door was a little ajar, letting a band of sunshine from the bright place lie on the ground between the roofing trees.

He pushed the door wide, and went in.

The bright light struck him in the face. All the little twisted columns that held up the low arcades blazed beneath the golden sun; they were crusted with jewels—rubies and emeralds and pure gold—and the shining day had set them valiantly afire.

Verney did not stay by them; his desire was not for the cool circle of the cloisters; his eyes sought the heart of the little garden-square, and his feet stumbled towards it through the low palms and dark, sweet roses that hung over the little twisting path.

There, in the centre of the labyrinth, was his journey's end, for at the bottom of a grey well, strangely wrought and deeply scarred, water rose and musically choked, and sang perpetually.

His hands caught and held the well's mouth where the dragging rope had scarred it, and he stood so for a moment and listened. He had travelled far to listen. . . . It was very sweet. . . .

Verney sighed a little, and sank down beside the well, and leaned his forehead against the grey, scarred lip.

CHAPTER XX

A MISSION OF DIPLOMACY

MR. CHARLES ILBERT was a fastidious person to the verge of dandyism. His acquaintance with the region of the city called S. Angelo was not of an intimate or personal nature. He knew it, so to speak, from the point of view of the intelligent sightseer, with the added discernment of the artist, quick to appraise beauty and divine significance in that in which the ordinary man would see merely sordidness and squalor. Confront this ordinary man of hygiene and common-sense with enough ancient and tradition-dignified squalor, and you make of him, given zeal for reform and the instinct for action, what one half of the world calls a Vandal.

On the question of Vandalism as affecting medieval Rome, Mr. Ilbert was on occasion as eloquent as any of his trade. 'The fundamental—the really ludicrous mistake,' he would observe, 'is to regard the city as a place to live in. It is not a place to live in; it should be emptied, by edict, of all its inhabitants, and then all this wretched so-called improvement would not be necessary. We were born to look at Rome, not to live in her. But Governments have no sense of honour, the Italian Government least of all. S. Angelo, now—I grant you it is in its way the most interesting region of Rome,

with its extraordinary jumble of the medieval and the classic; but as for being habitable—my dear Rosamund, I had a terrible morning—a very narrow street, with cheese shops! There is nothing surprising in anyone who has spent the summer there being in the throes of disease; the atmosphere alone would account for it, without the overwork and—well—insufficient nourishment the doctor mentioned. His room is not spacious; I imagine it gets rather warm in this weather. He is going to be removed shortly to the hospital, when his state is less critical. He's quite bad now, it seems. He lay and remarked at intervals that he could not speak Italian, that it was a beastly long way, and more particularly that he did not paint well enough. Someone of the name of Hummel would appear to have levelled this accusation at him, and it seems to have impressed him a good deal. To judge from the specimens of his art that I saw on the table, I should say that Hummel was more or less justified in his assertion. But I was relieved that he was not quite himself, because I felt that I was doing a very intrusive thing. He has the air always of being able to manage his own affairs so infinitely better than anyone else can manage them for him—and he does manage them so precious badly! And I really don't see,' he concluded meditatively, 'quite that there's anything in particular one can do for him, under the circumstances, beyond letting his friends know, which, of course, I've done.'

'I wonder if they'll come,' Rosamund said reflectively. 'His aunt, perhaps—to be nursed by Mrs. Ruth! He little knows what risks we've exposed him to. But perhaps they'll let him severely alone. I've no doubt he'd prefer it. . . .

No, mother, we really can't have him out here to convalesce; he would hate it so. One has to pretend always, you know, that there's nothing whatever the matter with him; it would make him so cross if one didn't. One stands and converses with him on the stairs while he's behaving as if he was mad or drunk, or both, and tranquilly asks him if he won't come and call. He likes it. As for coming to stay with us, he would see himself further first! But he is not going to stay in Rome; he is going home to England the moment he is well enough.

That pronouncement had the air of an edict issued with a serene finality.

'Of course,' Mr. Ilbert said, 'he will no doubt be entirely at your disposal, my dear. . . .'

'He is going home to England,' Rosamund repeated tranquilly, 'where he should have gone long ago.'

Verney, from the hot dawns to the hot evenings, and all through the hot nights, tramped mile upon mile of white burnt road that wound interminably through brown burnt plains beneath a pale burnt sky. The smell of the dust rose bitterly to choke him; it lay white upon the coarse grass and yellow fennel and dead thistles by the roadside. Carts stirred the dust, with a jangling of bells and rattling of wheels, and shouting discordant and continuous. Wine-carts passed with no little dog behind; he turned sickly away—the public would have none of them. Besides, he did not paint well enough. . . . All the time water called him, singing, in a grey stone well. But there was no blue dome to beckon him on his way; his world was shut in by rough, palely hueless walls, and the brown oblong of massive stone wall which was all his window revealed to him of the

world beyond. He could not penetrate that oblong; it shut him in, glooming hotly upon him—the sinister horizon of his world. He got to know every crevice between the great blocks of stone with an intimate, tired knowledge.

Then one day—it was the third day, only he thought it was about the thirtieth—he exchanged the brown oblong of wall for an angel poised militant against a hot blue sky. He was not delirious then; he knew perfectly well what they were doing with him; he did not want to leave the *Via del Teatro di Marcello*, only he was much too tired to protest.

‘You see,’ he merely remarked languidly, ‘it’s the only place where I can afford to live.’

But the doctor knew no English, and did not understand.

In consequence Verney found himself in a long, oddly barren, strangely spacious room, so cool after the room at No. 19 that he went to sleep on the spot, and woke to stare, through one of a great row of windows opposite, at the angel militant, and at the immense sea of buildings spreading into distance beyond it. He could see the tops of three obelisks, and wearied himself by wondering which they were. It was certainly rather funny to be in one of a row of beds like this, in such an odd, bare room that did not smell of cheese or fish or any of the usual things. But it was cold—cold to make one freeze; he was shivering furiously. He had shivered with cold sometimes even in the *Via del Teatro di Marcello*; it seemed that cold weather kept coming on at recurrent intervals, interrupting the great heat.

So from shivering he fell at last into a sick listlessness, and lay watching with tired eyes the distant happenings of the ward, and everything

seemed infinitely far away, as if a thick curtain of soft wool had been hung between him and the world.

Certain things which had at first vaguely surprised him, he grew, as the days passed, to accept without question. It seemed wholly natural that Harry Pattinson and his cousin Humphrey should come and visit him; he did not say much to them, nor they to him, but he told them whether he was cold or hot, and when he wanted something to eat, though he came to learn that it was of very little use to tell them that. They never stayed long, and it did not make much difference to Verney whether they were there or not: the soft, vague curtain that veiled the world and the whole of life seemed to hang before them, too. Verney desired no closer approach; it would have bored and disturbed him, because he was tired, and had no desires except to lie listlessly in silence, not even thinking, but watching the poised defending angel beneath half-shut lids.

But gradually, by very slow degrees, the grey curtain seemed to lift a little.

One day Pattinson came alone. Verney watched him vaguely, conscious of a lack, as he had watched the wine-cart without the little dog, frowning a little, till the lack defined itself.

‘Where’s Humphrey?’ he said.

Pattinson sat down upon the bed, placidly rubicund, cheerfully irrelevant, gently loquacious, admirably young. By the side of the gaunt, dark-browed, hollow-cheeked sick man, who was fifteen years his junior, he looked like a rosy little boy.

‘Humphrey,’ he said, ‘has gone home. His parishioners were pining for him. They don’t care about the *locum tenens*, I think——’

He flowed gently on; Verney stared wearily from under his brows, and did not listen.

‘So you’ve stayed,’ he observed presently.

‘Yes; I’ve taken rooms, you know. When you’re well enough. . . .’

Verney attended to his own thoughts, and let the flow go by him.

‘Who’s been to see me,’ he inquired at length, ‘besides you?’

‘Well—no one since you came here, I think. Mr. Ilbert, you know, came to see you at the other place.’

Verney frowned a little, half-perplexed.

‘I suppose I dreamed it,’ he said, ‘that—that someone was there, you know, sitting where you are now. That was nonsense, of course.’

There was the faint note of a wistful question in his voice. He was still too ill to separate quite the possible from the impossible.

‘You imagined that, I expect,’ said Pattinson.

Verney did not ask many questions. He turned over the situation during the hours he spent staring at the angel, verified his deductions with, ‘I suppose the Ilberts wired?’ and let it rest there. To Pattinson’s immense relief, he said nothing at all of his grandfather. Colonel Ruth’s attitude towards the business had been rather a shock to Pattinson. As Mr. Ilbert had telegraphed not to Colonel Ruth, whose address he did not know, but to his friend Miss Prendergast, it had fallen upon her to deliver the message. When she returned from this mission, Pattinson reflected that he had seldom seen his aunt so angry.

‘It’s atrocious,’ she said; ‘Francis ought to be excommunicated for unnatural conduct. I dare say he might have been, if he had stuck to the

creed of his ancestors. A nice story he would have had to come out with at confession! Of course, it was partly that he was angry at Charles Ilbert telegraphing to me instead of to him; but then he never heard of Francis, as far as I know. I said so to Francis, but he's the most illogical, pig-headed person! He would have it that people chose to assume that his grandson's illness was no concern of his. I said: "Well, you admit that it *is* your concern, then." "I admit nothing," he said, glowering at me from under his eyebrows in that horrid way he's always had when Verney or Meyrick has been under discussion; "I admit no such thing. Verney's taken his own way, and till he chooses to apologize and come home I've nothing to do with him."

"Apologize and come home, indeed!" I said; "why, the boy's half dying of fever."

"I've not had a word from him for five months," he snapped at me.

"Well," I said, "I shall send Archie. I'd go myself if I were ten years younger. It's quite obvious Charles Ilbert knew the right person to wire to." He didn't like that a bit. But though he said nothing, I fancy he was quite glad you should go. I suggested that Humphrey should go, too, and he simply waived all responsibility in the matter, only grunting out that whoever went, of course, should have a free hand in the matter of expenses. The fact is, he's as anxious about the boy as he can be. That's what makes him so cross, partly; only why can't he own to it like a man? But there's a pair of them. I've no doubt Verney's thoroughly sick by now of the quarrel, and would like to be friends and come home in time for the pheasants; but, of course,

nothing will induce him to say so. That's what it is to be a Ruth! And Francis, the old stupid, actually thinks Verney's just like Meyrick, who, to do him justice, couldn't bear a ridiculous sulky grudge to save his life—Meyrick, who always, directly after getting into a more than usually bad scrape, used to write and—but, there, I'm telling you a great deal too much.'

'Please go on, Aunt Betty. I've always wanted to know more about Meyrick Ruth.'

'I dare say you have. At present Verney is the topic under discussion, however. Now look here, you mustn't, whatever happens, let Verney know what a disgusting mood his grandfather is in. Indicate to him that the Colonel is rather softened and very anxious about him, and wants very much to have him home. Of course, you mustn't know anything about the quarrel; that would put the boy's back up directly. Verney is as sulky as a bear, you know. But refer tactfully to the pheasants; don't put it on grounds of health, because Verney's as touchy as a child about being looked after and that sort of thing. But he must come home; I won't receive you back without him, Archie. Tell him the Colonel hasn't been strong; anything you think will fetch him. Don't let Humphrey manage it; the stupid boy would bungle it hopelessly. You'll probably bungle it, too, if you can; but you aren't quite so hopelessly guileless as Humphrey Ruth, though you have a distressing lack of nerve on critical occasions. Oh, why can't I go myself! I'd manage the absurd boy in no time.'

Pattinson and Humphrey Ruth had attained while looking round the atrocious little den in the Via del Teatro di Marcello to a new realization of the situation.

'He said he was hard up'—thus Humphrey, after a whistle of dismay—'and I lent him five pounds! Why didn't he say fifty, silly ass? He never asked for anything more after that; I think my grandfather wrote to him about it, and put his back up somehow. But, of course, if we'd any of us known,' he added, a little deprecatingly, seeking to extenuate his grandfather in Pattinson's eyes.

The story of the picture postcard trade, as illustrated by the few extant examples (those final examples with which Hummel had declined to discredit his shop windows), made Pattinson chuckle.

Humphrey frowned perplexedly.

'They aren't good, are they?' he surmised tentatively. 'I know precious little about painting; but, well, hang it all, I don't think these can be good, you know! I thought old Verney could paint a bit.'

Pattinson shook his head in gentle sorrow.

'Poor old Verney!' he said.

Three weeks later Verney left the hospital for Pattinson's rooms in Via del Babuino.

'So you've got my things from the Via del Teatro,' he commented, observing the contents of the room with languid interest. He was not pleased that his home should have been explored, but it was the visitation of the fastidious Mr. Ilbert that chiefly weighed upon him. 'I rather think I owe some rent there, by the way,' he added.

'No; we paid that. It's all right.'

Verney, after a moment or two, gave a little laugh, which sounded slightly artificial. He glanced at Pattinson sideways, a trifle uneasily.

'It wasn't much, was it?' he observed; 'a cheap

enough little hole, wasn't it? Not half bad, though, you know; good position and all that. Comfortable, too, in a small way—what?

Beneath the elaborately careless superciliousness of the tone there lurked challenging suspicion.

'Awfully jolly,' Pattinson said promptly; 'a really ripping little place.'

The suspicion remained in Verney's eye; Pattinson felt uncomfortable under it.

Verney inquired presently, with studied indifference: 'Was Mr. Ilbert there much?'

'No, not really much. He came to see you once or twice, you know, before we came. It's so awfully picturesque all round there, isn't it? Ripping old houses, don't you know, and the narrow streets with the washing.'

'Awfully jolly.'

Verney looked a little sick for the moment.

'But'—Pattinson thought he would here make the plunge—'hardly the place for this weather. Too warm, you know. Awfully nice, but several degrees too warm.'

'Oh, I don't know. It does me well enough.'

'Seems to me it's done you several degrees too well, if you ask me; overdone you, don't you know—what?'

'Is that funny? Sorry I haven't energy to smile.'

Pattinson proceeded to bring the heavy guns of his diplomacy to bear on the situation. Verney lay and looked at him with a grave contemplative regard.

'I'm not coming home, you know,' he remarked, listlessly indifferent. To that he stuck, presenting languid inattention to argument and rebuke. Once, to Pattinson's plea that 'he had his orders and didn't dare to disobey them,' he

inquired, 'Whose orders?' Pattinson said, 'Oh, well—they're all determined you shall come, you know. My aunt, and—and the Colonel, you know, and the lot of them.'

But he blushed a little under Verney's scrutiny; he knew that his mention of the Colonel had not rung true.

'I shan't be allowed back without you,' he pleaded pathetically. 'Oh, don't be an ass, Verney!'

'I'm rather tired of this,' Verney said languidly. 'I want to play chess.'

But he found, when the chess-board was set out, that he had forgotten all the moves.

'I rather think I've forgotten everything of any sort that I ever knew,' he observed. 'I wonder, as a matter of curiosity, if any of it's going to come back eventually? Because, if not, it may be a trifle awkward for me in some ways. That fellowship, for instance—did you know I was supposed to be working at archæology all this time? I am, you know. And I've done so little that, if I don't grind fairly hard now, they may take the thing away or something. That's one reason why it would be absurd for me to go home now, just as I'm getting well.'

'A nice lot of work you're likely to get through!'

'I hope so,' said Verney.

Pattinson felt moved to say: 'And what do you flatter yourself you're going to live on meanwhile?' If he had been so tactless as to do so, Verney would have had his answer ready. He had received that morning a letter from Carolina enclosing fifty pounds. The letter was characteristic of its writer—pleasant, with a shrewd vein of humour running through it, attractively

implicative of liking on the part of the writer for the person he wrote to. Verney read it with a languid indifference; he was perhaps too ill and too tired to feel acutely about anything at present. The old glamour and the old disgust were both things far off, belonging to a phase of existence when things mattered so infinitely more; he did not suppose that they would ever matter intensely again (the curtain still shut him partially from the world). In the meantime he was much too poor to dream of refusing fifty pounds; it gave him, indeed, a pleasant sense of independence of his world; it gave him also an odd sensation of pride. If Pattinson inquired into his means, it would be not unpleasing to be able to reply, like any other man: 'Oh, I get money from my father, you know.' But Pattinson did not inquire. He was being forced to meddle up to a certain point; he had no intention of going beyond his orders.

'This must be an awful bore for you,' Verney said reflectively one day. 'I say, you know, I wish you'd go home now.'

'Well, I'm enjoying myself immensely. One ought to see Rome, you know. But, of course, if you think you're well enough to travel——'

'The Ilberts are still at Albano, aren't they?' Verney interrupted.

'That is a side-issue; but yes, I believe they are.'

Verney frowned over his meditations.

'I've a sort of idea,' he said presently, 'that I was most beastly rude once—the day before I was ill. I can't remember much about it, because all that time's gone to bits—and it may, for me—I don't want to remember anything about it. But I do remember that I behaved rather like a mad idiot when I met—the Ilberts. I think

I must really have begun to be ill by then, you see. Anyhow, I don't believe I was more than half responsible.'

'No; no, I don't suppose you were. I dare say they thought you had been drinking, don't you know; it was very hot.'

'Well'—Verney still frowned thoughtfully—'I believe, you know, I ought to apologize to the Ilberts.'

'Well, if it would make you any happier— But they know you had about a hundred and four degrees of fever on you that day, so I dare say they'll overlook your conduct.'

'How do you know they know that?'

'Oh, they're awfully clever people, aren't they? My aunt always says Mr. Ilbert is an Aw clever chap. Besides, that was what made him come and look you up, you know. Miss Ilbert, you see, was so much struck by you.'

'I forgot,' said Verney. 'Yes, I suppose it was that.'

There was an odd look of softness in his eyes for a moment. He seemed to have forgotten Pattinson's existence.

'I must go and see them,' he said presently, 'and explain a bit; I'd rather, even if they know. I don't want to seem rude, you know. Besides, it was awfully decent of them to trouble about me.'

He promised himself that interview, and did not look beyond it. He did not intend to see anything of the Ilberts in the future; it was out of the question that he should ever again be friends with them. His father had taken all his friendships and broken them as on an anvil, leaving jagged fragments that it hurt him to touch. His friendship with the Ilberts had broken into the most jaggedly-edged fragments

of all ; they hurt him more than any of the others—a good deal more. He shrank from touching them, and yet felt strangely impelled to the contact. His sane judgment would have told him to leave them lying where they were, and not to hurt himself with them any more. His sick fancy craved one interview, and did not look beyond.

Besides, he owed an apology. A man could not behave in that manner—he dimly, painfully strove to remember it—and leave it at that. Also, they had been very good to him. . . .

‘I shall go to Albano in three days,’ said Verney.

‘Oh, well. But why in three days?’

‘Oh, I don’t know. To give myself time to get a few brains, partly. Besides, I look such an ass now ; you can’t go about looking like that,’ said Verney, rather crossly.

Pattinson surveyed the gaunt frame and white, hollow-eyed face, and chuckled a little.

‘No ; no, it might give the Cecil Ilberts rather a fit, certainly. You aren’t giving yourself much time to get back your beauty, though.’

‘It’ll have to do.’

CHAPTER XXI

AN APOLOGY

VERNEY trod the long white street again, rather slowly. It was possible that he had not allowed himself enough time. He still, to use his own phrase, looked rather an ass. It was to be hoped that he had 'got a few brains.'

'That's the beastly place,' he observed, sighting the great biscuit-coloured edifice at the end of the street. 'I hope I shan't run into the lady of the silk dress; I should feel so shy.'

He was not spared that embarrassment; he encountered Signora Azzareto at the hall-door. He was conscious that he blushed a little under her rather cursory regard as she creaked by.

'There,' he observed to himself, 'is an impression which no apology will efface.'

He followed the stout porter up the wide marble stairs. The thing was coming back to him rather painfully. He saw the step on which he had stood, the part of the broad marble rail on which he had leaned; he heard again the echo of the gay tones which had said: 'You'd much better come up and see us.' Then defiance took him. 'They must know that when a man's ill he can't do the polite; 'twasn't my fault.' He felt a distinct irritation at having been put thus in the wrong; it was not what he wished, to have people

making allowances for him. He resented it, half sullenly. Why could not people leave him alone, when he desired nothing better? It was an abominable thing, harrassing a man with invitations, and expecting him to reply politely, when he felt as ill as that.

The porter left him in the Ilberts' drawing-room, and went to make inquiries.

He came back to announce that the padrone and padrona were out driving, but the Signorina was at home, and would be pleased if the Signore would come out to the terrace. As it was the Signorina whom the Signore intended to see, he went out on the terrace through the tall, open windows.

Rosamund sat at the end of the terrace at an angle of the wall, and a little stone Mercury balanced lightly on one leg at her left, and a self-conscious Venus unsuccessfully strove to screen herself with floating draperies and one mutilated arm at her right. There were little statues set all round the wall, some of them looking up at the palace windows, some gazing over the Campagna, which stretched below them, a great burnt golden sea in the golden afternoon, bounded far to the left by a long glitter of dazzling brightness, on which the eye could not bear to rest, to the right by the furthest peak of the blue hills. There was something pathetic about those small stone figures, with their eternal meaningless jocundity (they were products of the eighteenth century), in contrast with their weather-stained, mutilated forms.

It was shady on the terrace, for great vine-trellises were arched over it, densely clad; through the starry, warm, delicately-veined leaves and heavy clusters, purple and yellow,

the scorching sun only came in little flames and flickers, starring the pink stone floor.

A hammock swung between two posts in the shade. Rosamund Ilbert rose from it.

Defiance and resentment died suddenly in Verney's soul. He only knew that she had been strangely, marvellously good to him, and that she stood and waited for him there, with the sunlight flecking upon her through the vines, and her eyes shadowed and darkened by her large hat, so that he could not see their laughter.

He came to meet her, not knowing that in his gaunt pallor and hollow-eyed emaciation he looked, as he would have said, very much of an ass. Her brows were raised a little as he came towards her; her smile held a touch of dismay, but that she did not let him see.

'I'm not at all sure that I approve of this,' she said, sitting down rather quickly after they had shaken hands. But he did not seem in any haste to follow her example. He stood opposite her, and leaned against the low, broad wall, near the little Mercury.

'I'm so glad you're better—but are you sure the doctor said you might get up?'

Her brows were raised in the way he knew; her way when she meant to hurl an insult at him, and wondered, with amused deprecation, how he would take it. He took it with a smile. It was rather odd that to-day in her presence he felt not unhappy, not resentful, not ashamed, but gay with the old friendly gaiety of their earlier intercourse.

'I have been up for a week,' he said.

'Have you? Well, won't you sit down? Suppose you were to tumble over backwards, you know?'

He sat down, but on the wall, and rested his elbows on his knees and looked at her. He meant to have this one interview, and did not look beyond.

'I'm sorry father and mother are out,' she said, 'but they'll be back before long, I expect. They'll be so pleased to see you, you know, up and—no, I can't say well—but better, anyhow.'

'Perfectly well,' said Verney. 'I want to thank your father, you know, for coming to see me. It was very good of him.'

'You don't bear a grudge, then—for the telegram? It was an unpardonable liberty, wasn't it? I knew you didn't want your family to come out and nurse you; I felt sure you only craved to be allowed to die in your own way.'

'And yet,' said Verney, 'you didn't grant me my solitary desire. It seems hard, certainly.'

His 'you' was in the singular number; he ignored the part, such as it was, that others had had in the matter. For it had, after all, been her business.

'I don't think I approve of granting people their desires,' she said reflectively; 'pampering them, don't you know. It's so bad for them.'

'Do you know why I've come here to-day?' Verney inquired suddenly.

'Oh, well—to show off, I suppose. The swagger of the convalescent. Unless it's delirium, which I am not at all sure it's not.'

'I came to apologize,' said Verney. 'When last I saw you, I have a strong idea that I behaved in a—a rather unusual way, you know.'

'Not to mention,' she said politely. 'And a flavour of unconventionality adds rather a spice to intercourse. I was rather taken by your manner

that afternoon. It was so refreshingly obvious that you meant what you said.'

'I don't believe I was really very fit that day,' said Verney apologetically.

Her eyebrows rose sceptically.

'You don't say so!'

'You knew that at the time, I hope?' he added.

'No. On the contrary, I was much struck by your look of robust health. You looked—well, almost as well as you do to-day, you know.' She looked at him for a moment reflectively, as he sat opposite her. 'And now you're going back to England,' she observed. It was not quite a question; rather an assumption.

He looked up at her.

'No,' he said simply; 'I'm not going to do that.'

'Oh—aren't you?'

Her brows rose again as she looked at him, tilting the red parasol she held a little to one side. He met the half-serious, half-whimsical, considering scrutiny with a stolid regard.

'But—how very extraordinary of you!' she observed. 'Haven't they all—the doctors and your friends and everybody—told you you must?'

'I don't know that that affects the question particularly,' said Verney stolidly.

The quizzical element in her regard grew to predominance

'Sets you more on your own way, I suppose. It would, naturally. What a pity they mentioned it.'

'Rome,' said Verney, 'is perfectly healthy now that the cooler weather is coming.'

'Oh—the cooler weather!'

She turned her eyes over the great scorched plains, that lay breathless beneath the weight of the burning afternoon, and made no other comment.

‘Besides, I’ve got my work to do,’ said Verney. ‘So you have. You look so particularly competent to do it, too.’ She looked at him consideringly for a moment. Her eyes became graver. ‘You really—if you won’t mind my saying so—are most oddly and reprehensibly stupid, do you know?’

‘Really,’ Verney said, stiffly.

He felt a little impatient and resentful. They were at cross purposes; she was talking in such ignorance of his case. There suddenly came over him a strange desire to be understood; to be thoroughly and utterly understood by her, and by no one else. It stung him that she should think him an unreasonable fool—he, who prided himself on his hard-headed common-sense.

He greatly wished her to understand; perhaps he a little unconsciously wished to sweep the laughter from her eyes, and make her take him seriously.

‘I can’t go home,’ he blurted out, his eyes turned from her over the scorched, bitter waste to the purple hills. ‘I can’t possibly go home. I’ve quarrelled hopelessly with my people.’

It was an abrupt descent into tragedy and reality. Her eyes grew grave to meet it, but if he had been looking at her he would have known that he had told her nothing new. But she was glad he had said it; it opened a gate to her which she had been hoping he would open, for it made her task simpler.

‘Oh,’ she said, rather gently; and added, ‘I’m sorry.’

He knew by her tone that he had swept the mockery from her eyes.

'So you see,' he said, and his voice rang bitterly, 'I can't go home.'

She did not speak for some time. She, too, looked over the burnt waste, where the Appian Way dipped down and clove a long path to Rome.

'I don't think I do see,' she said. 'Don't they—oh, it sounds a horribly impertinent question—but don't they want you to go back?'

'I should imagine they would much rather I stayed where I am,' said Verney, 'or went to Jericho or the North Pole.'

At the abandon of the youthful bitterness, and its endeavour to veil itself in careless sarcasm, her eyes smiled a little again under the shadow of her hat.

'I wonder,' she said gently, with an inflection of incredulity. 'If they've said that, do you think they meant to be taken quite literally? I don't think, you know, one's people usually mean quite that.'

'They don't usually say it,' said Verney.

The pause seemed to comment on his statement; his honesty—he was naturally a person of a very literal habit of truth-telling—told him he had not quite put the case rightly. He must be fair to his 'people.'

'I don't mean to say,' he said, 'that they did say quite that. I believe they would have me back if—well, if I wrote to ask them to, and if I—if I apologized, you know.' His pale face coloured a little. 'But they'd do that because they'd feel obliged, that's all. They've as good as told me they don't want to have anything more to do with me.'

There was another pause.

'I don't think,' said Rosamund, 'that I should be inclined to sit down under that.'

He turned and looked at her with a touch of surprise.

'I've got to, unfortunately.'

'Not quite,' she said gently. 'You say there's an opening. As long as there's that, it isn't very hopeless.'

He looked at her moodily.

'There's no opening I can take.'

Her brows rose a little.

'You mean none you want to take?'

He thought it over. He was a literal person.

'Yes, I suppose you can put it like that.'

'Well, of course—if you don't want to, there's no more to be said.'

Verney was stung by the cool carelessness of her tone. He turned in sudden protest.

'You don't know my grandfather,' he said.

Her eyes softened gravely at the hurt appeal in his voice.

'No,' she said; 'and I know I've no right to speak. The meddling of people who don't know anything about it is very—insupportable, isn't it? I am being horribly impertinent, I believe; it's an old failing of mine, as you know. You should snub me for it violently.'

He looked a little puzzled.

'But I want you to understand,' he said. 'I told you, you know, because I wanted you to understand.'

She smiled a little, inwardly, at his delusion that she had not understood before.

'You see,' she said, 'it always rather riles me—I haven't a very good temper—to see people behaving in what strikes me as—well, as a foolish

manner of behaving, you know. I'm one of those overbearing people who like to force their point of view on their neighbours, in season and out of season. But I think you know that already, perhaps ?

He met her half smile with a quick look, which half smiled too.

'Don't, please,' he said; and added gravely: 'I want you to understand, you know.'

She twirled her parasol handle thoughtfully between her fingers.

'I'm trying to,' she said; 'and—yes, I think I do, more or less. You don't want to take your opening, because it would be rather—rather insupportable. I see that, of course.'

'I should be accused of "whining for money,"' he said, giving more bitterness than he knew to the inflection of the phrase, and staring at the ground between his knees moodily.

She said nothing, but looked away over the bitter, burnt plains to Rome. When she spoke it was rather quickly.

'Oh, I know; it would hurt very badly. Don't think I'm such a fool as not to know that.'

Silence fell again, while the quivering afternoon crept round to the West.

'How old is your grandfather?' asked Rosamund suddenly.

He looked up in surprise.

'I don't know. About seventy-five, I think.'

'I see.' She paused again. 'I wonder what life would be like if one was as old as that. Rather hard to live, I expect. Rather difficult, and a little sad. I expect it needs more imagination than we've most of us got to imagine it at all rightly. But somebody I knew once—a very good person indeed—who was nearly eighty

when she died, told me once that she believed the old found everything infinitely more difficult than the young. Not only physical things, and not only things of the brain, but simple, ordinary little efforts to behave decently—to be unselfish, and generous, and self-forgetting. I don't know that one would think it, specially, from the old and young people one knows; but if it is so, it seems to me to make age a very pathetic thing. She thought—and said quite frankly—that it was the business of the young to make life possible to the old, because they are so much stronger. Stronger and better, she said; but there I didn't agree. Nobody could have agreed with her example there before them. But stronger of course they are; more able they are to bear knocks and to put themselves together again when they are broken, and to look at life widely and sanely. They don't always do it, of course; but that is because they won't. I think the old often can't.'

She broke off and silence fell again, he staring on the ground, she looking across the plains to Rome. It was some time before he spoke.

'You think I ought to go back?' he said quietly.

The hint of a smile came into her eyes.

'You've divined that,' she said. 'Well, yes, I do.'

'It would be most singularly unpleasant,' he said slowly.

She gave the red parasol an impatient tilt.

'Don't be so horribly obvious,' she said.

'I'm thinking it out,' said he, looking up at her. 'It would be unpleasant, not only for me, but for him—my grandfather. He has always been angry with me and distrusted me ever since

I was a child. We have had rows all the time, but this is such a much worse row than we have ever had before that I don't think we can smooth it over and pretend it hasn't been. You say life is difficult for the old—and I believe you're quite right there—and I believe I haven't been so considerate as I ought. But things have happened, and things have been said, which neither of us, I suppose, can very well forget. They would always be between us, you see, even if I owned myself wholly in the wrong, and asked to be allowed to come home. He would let me, but he wouldn't forget. And he'd always think I had apologized for the sake of the money. We should begin again on a hopelessly wrong footing.'

'Oh,' she said, 'the footing might be as hopelessly wrong as you like, to begin with. I'm not saying it wouldn't be. But you'd get beyond it; that's the point, don't you see. The footing one starts on is often of surprisingly little importance. One gets beyond it; lives it down. You can build quite passable buildings sometimes on the craziest foundations. That's the beauty of life. It simply goes straight ahead and crushes things down; it's much too strong a force to let miserable little obstacles rise and spoil it. One thinks one will never forget, and one tries in vain to forgive people; but in the end we forgive them through no merit of our own, but simply because life carries us on and forces us to. Oh, it's no good trying to be too heroic; all we need do is to trust to life to slur things over for us—in time. But we must give it its chance with us. We must act as if things hadn't happened, and in time it will be as if they hadn't. I'm not saying it's ideal; if it was, it wouldn't be life. Most of life

is a sort of *pis aller*—making the best of a poor business. We've just got to take things as they are, and make what we can of them.'

Verney was leaning forward, resting his elbows on his knees, and looking at her as she looked away over the great waste.

'If I thought he wanted me——' he said.

'Of course he wants you!' She spoke with a quick impatience. 'You know that. That's part of the pathos: the old do want the young, however bitterly they deny it. But the young often don't want the old—enough to pay the price.'

She looked at him for a moment consideringly and rather gently, but with a teasing glint in her eyes.

'You don't like owning yourself in the wrong much, do you?' she said calmly. 'Though, of course, you are in the wrong—oh no, I don't want to know about it—but people are always in the wrong, on both sides, when they quarrel. But you're—if you won't mind my mentioning it—so sadly conceited and so deplorably obstinate——'

She flung the charge at him with a cool carelessness, as if it were a matter of course, but with the flicker of a smile in her eyes.

'I wonder,' she added more gravely, 'how many lives have been spoiled by obstinacy and conceit—by sheer stupidity, that is, for that's what it comes to when all's said and done.'

She looked at him and half smiled, with a touch of sadness in the mockery.

'Well, that's the end of my lecture. It's been quite unpardonable, so now you may depart in anger, and you needn't try to forgive me—I shan't mind. I've done my best to be edifying, but I'm almost afraid you aren't a very edifiable subject.'

He was looking at her as she half smiled, with his eyes oddly bright in his white face.

'You want me to go home?' he said, speaking rather low.

The wording of the observation was slightly different from that in which he had expressed the same conclusion before.

'My hints have been delicately veiled, I know,' she said, 'but you're very clever at getting at the gist of a matter.'

'Then,' he said slowly, 'I shall go home.'

'Of course you will,' she said, and quite smiled now, with a quick relief in her eyes. 'I knew you would if you came to consider the question.'

'I haven't considered the question,' said Verney.

She looked at him suddenly, caught by something in his tone. As she looked something came into her own eyes, mingling with the glad relief, slowly,—the vague, far-off hint of a look hardly definable—something akin to doubt. It was a grave look, and a little intent. She no longer smiled.

'I haven't considered the question at all,' said Verney. His face was very white, his eyes shining oddly. 'I don't know—or care—whether you are right or not. But I believe,' he added, 'that you are always right. You have said things which I know are true. But it isn't because they are true that I am going. I am going because you tell me to go.'

In the still pause which followed the words seemed to sink into the silence, to acquire an emphasis, a significance which grew with the moments.

The doubt in Rosamund's eyes was no longer vague; it deepened slowly, in the waiting pause, to fear.

Then she laughed a little, lightly.

'There certainly is nothing like sheer, outrageous cheek for getting what one wants,' she said. 'I'm glad my importunity has been successful. I really take great credit to myself. Moral: Bore a person enough, and they will give in at last out of sheer weariness.'

She rose and came and stood by the wall, resting her hands upon it, and looking away eastwards across the hot plains to the blue peak that ended the chain of hills.

'And he says the cooler weather's coming!' she murmured, her eyes on the quivering afternoon sky.

He looked at her as she stood by him, and drew a deep breath, his eyes resting on the line of her averted cheek.

'And now,' he said, 'may I thank you for—everything?'

His voice shook a little; his illness was still upon him.

'There's nothing to thank me for,' she said. 'And—no, I don't think you might if there was. I don't like being thanked.'

'But you must bear it,' he said. 'I don't care if you like it or not; I like to do it, and that's all that matters. And I hardly see that you've a right to mind. You can't be all to anyone that you've been to me, and then object to his thanking you for it.'

An odd excitement was taking possession of him; it was probable that his temperature was high.

'Thank me, then, if you will,' she said, with a smile, 'but I don't see what for, you know.'

'Don't you?' he flung back at her. 'Don't you? Let me tell you, then. If you've been to anyone

what you've been to me, it's right you should know it——'

At that she caught her breath and made a swift movement of the hand, as if to ward something off.

'Don't,' she muttered.

He looked at her.

'You don't want to know it, then ?'

'No ; I don't think I do want to know it.'

There was a quick tremor in her voice. If he had desired to sweep the mockery from her eyes, he had done it now.

'But you shall know it,' he said ; then added violently : 'Good God ! I'm not asking you for anything ; I can't do that—you know I can't do that—ever. I'm simply telling you—and you shall hear ; you owe it to me to hear. You can't do all that—be all that—to anyone—and then leave it.'

'I'm afraid——'

'Yes ?'

'I'm afraid—that you are giving me more than I can take from you,' she said, speaking very low.

'I'm giving you,' he flung back, 'all I've got to give—as you know. I've given it already ; it was no doing of mine—I couldn't help it. Why won't you take it from me ? Why ? . . . I tell you I'm asking nothing—I never shall ask anything. . . . But you know what you've been. . . . Oh, you know how you came into my life. Even from the first there was no one else like you. And then, when no one else cared—that morning—you were sorry, and showed me you were sorry. I was grateful ; I couldn't tell you so at the time'—at the memory of the time his face set like a flint—'but I tell you now. And all through this summer, which has been—which has been hell, you know—the heat, and the grind, and—and

other things—it was as if you were there all the time, watching and caring. All through the beastly nights you were there ; I talked to you and looked at you. I grew to count on those dreams ; they carried me along when there wasn't much else. And I got mixed up, all that time, between you as I had really known you, and as I knew you every night in my dreams (not always sleeping dreams, you know, but—well, you know the sort of thing), and I couldn't always remember which was real and which wasn't. But it didn't really matter, you see, because one thing was real all the time—you had cared—you had been sorry ; you, out of all the world, hadn't joined in the kicking process.' His face set hard again. 'And then—then I met you again. I didn't know what I was doing ; I made a fool of myself ; I behaved abominably. You know what you did then : instead of letting me alone and being angry at my beastly rudeness, and not bothering about me any more, you sent your father to look after me, and—well, you showed again that you cared a little what became of me. And then I came here now to see you. I meant to apologize, and thank you, and go. I wouldn't have troubled you with my concerns. But you troubled yourself about them ; you showed me you wanted me not to make an ass of myself ; you understood, and you cared. You gave me advice, and I have taken it. . . .'

He paused, unsteadily, and was silent for a moment.

'And now,' he said, 'you say you won't take from me—what I am giving you. Is it—is it quite fair, do you think ?'

She had listened in still silence, her face very pale, her hand clenching rather tightly over the

stone foot of the little Mercury. Her eyes rested bitterly on the soft, far hills.

'I am sorry,' she said, very low, and her voice broke on the words a little, strangely; 'I am most horribly sorry. I—didn't know.'

'Sorry!' he broke out. 'Why?' and repeated savagely: 'It means nothing to you; I'm not asking you for anything. You've no call to be sorry. . . . But I forgot; you are always sorry for other people's troubles.'

She grew a shade paler at the tone; her fingers clenched more tightly. He had risen, and stood a little behind her.

'So you didn't know,' he repeated, with slow, concentrated bitterness; 'why didn't you know? You, who know so much about everyone, must have known this. You must have known that it's enough merely to be with you—to see you—to hear you speak; nothing else is needed. And when, besides all that—as if that wasn't enough—you go out of your way to be—as you have been to me, to take an interest, to help—well, you must know what the results are bound to be. Besides, you've learnt before,' he added bitterly, and she winced a little; 'you've learnt, and I ought to have learnt, if I had not been a hopeless ass. I ought to have learnt, from Denham and other people, but I didn't. I couldn't help myself, I suppose. I simply walked into it like a fool. And you, it seems—didn't know. I think it was your business to know. I think you had no right not to know. I think—you shouldn't have interfered with me if you didn't know where it was bound to lead.'

His voice shook hoarsely as he ended. He stood for a moment and looked at her, his eyes resting once more drearily on the pale line of

her cheek as she looked away from him, and heard again her broken whisper: 'Oh, I'm sorry.'

He shook suddenly from head to foot as he stood.

'Oh, you should have let me alone!' he cried. Then, as it were, the hot violence of his resentment died in him suddenly, leaving him sick and tired, and very cold.

'I beg your pardon,' he said quietly, and turned from her and walked away.

CHAPTER XXII

ROSAMUND WORKS IT OUT

It was Jane Gerard who assisted in the elucidation of the business to Rosamund. Her own realization of the situation, leading her first to the comment (deduced from the curtness of the replies her queries received), 'He seems to have been a most awful bore!' led her next to, 'I hope you discharged all your pent-up good advice on his head'; and then, curiosity growing, to, 'And did your lecture take up all the time he was here?'

Rosamund said 'No,' and added after a moment, 'there was his, too.'

In saying it she just smiled for a moment, but Jane saw that her eyes were suddenly wet.

'His?'

Jane was interested.

'Yes. . . . Oh, he thinks, you know, that one shouldn't give advice.'

'Oh! He told you so once before, didn't he? Rather nice of him to take it under the circumstances, don't you think? And I suppose you told him, as you did before, that he was entirely wrong?'

'No. I'm not perfectly sure, but I believe I think he was entirely right. It's what I haven't made up my mind about so far. No, I don't

think he was entirely right ; but I believe I have been—well, horribly wrong. Somehow, but I don't see exactly where or how. I'm trying—but it isn't easy—to work it out.'

'Horribly wrong?' Jane considered the phrase, till it became luminous to her. Her conclusion was, 'He's been saying, then, all kinds of things that you didn't like to hear?'

Rosamund turned wet, tired eyes upon her.

'Don't say you've known it too.'

Jane shook her head.

'I haven't known it. But I've seen both of you within the last few hours'—she had met Verney in Albano—'and you say you've been wrong.'

'Wrong—oh, yes ; horribly, idiotically wrong. A fool, you know, and perhaps worse ; I don't know. Anyhow, a fool, of a very heavy type. I should be that simply not to have seen it all. . . . He told me I had no right not to have seen it. He was entirely right there, but the rest I don't understand—not yet. How have I been wrong? It's all so difficult. You see, I've made no difference ; I've been exactly the same to all sorts of people, men and women. It would be entirely different ; he doesn't realize it, but it would be so very entirely different if—if one cared in the other way. It's just there being nothing of the sort which makes it possible to show one's interest. Johnny, now'—by the mention of Johnny in this connection Jane gauged her cousin's unstrung condition—'Johnny, now, I was exactly, as far as I know, the same to him and to Maggie. I know I was, except that I was rather fondest of Maggie, and probably showed it.'

'Well,' Jane observed soothingly, 'if Maggie

had been a boy I dare say she would have proposed to you, too. By the way, *did* he actually come to that—Mr. Ruth, I mean?’

‘No; oh no. He never would have; he feels, you know, that he can’t. His father, I suppose, or some rubbish.’

‘Well, then’—Jane wrinkled her forehead a little—‘I don’t quite see—I mean, where was his right to lecture you? If he wouldn’t have had you even if you would have had him?’

‘Oh, he wasn’t logical. His temperature must have been a hundred and one at least. I saw it going up under my eyes; otherwise he would never have talked as he did, I suppose, quite. But that doesn’t affect my part of the business. The fact remains that I’ve made him care—and I’ve made him think I cared—and I don’t care.’ Her voice shook a little, wearily. ‘I want, somehow, to get at the rights of the thing.’

Jane considered the thing, thoughtfully.

‘Of course,’ she observed, with leisurely matter-of-factness, as if thinking it out, ‘it isn’t as if it was absolutely the first time——’

‘Don’t. That only proves the more that somehow I’ve been wrong all along. Because, you see, I’m not quite a fool—a helpless fool, like Hilda Derrincourt, who really can’t help such things.’

‘Well, your methods are certainly a little different, though the results——’

Rosamund, to use her own phrase, was working it out, with knitted brows.

‘And yet—one is, after all, concerned with other people. One’s concerned, it always seems to me, with so little else. And if one’s got anything one feels one can give to anyone else, even if it’s ever so little or so poor, well, one surely

has to give it. And if a person's hurt, one must do one's best for them; it's simply instinct, surely.'

'Well, of course, when the hurt person recovers, he's naturally a little grateful. I don't see that you ought to be surprised when gratitude turns into something else.'

Jane paused a moment. Her eyes rested on Rosamund in the deck chair, with the evening sunshine through the vines flickering on to her grey dress, and wide hat; she took in, with a lucid comprehension, the pure curve of cheek and chin, the strength of the lips, the eyes, now sad and shadowed tiredly, but with the whimsical laughter never far out of call.

'I think,' said Jane, 'it would be a little surprising, you know, if it *didn't* occasionally turn into something else. You know,' she proceeded, after a moment, 'I've often thought you rather wrong.'

'That's because you don't approve of meddling. But, you know, I think *you're* wrong there; you and Mr. Ruth and all the people who say one should never interfere. It wouldn't be life, as I understand it, if one kept to that. I don't know much, but I know that. One's got to care; one's got to do one's best.'

'I've always thought you rather wrong,' Jane continued placidly, 'in—just as you say—making no difference between men and women. Because, you see, there's a certain difference in their attitude towards you. It's a pity, I think, that there should be. It's a great pity, I think, that there should be two sexes at all. It seems to me one would be quite enough; then all these foolish complications wouldn't come in to spoil things. But as there are two—well,

there it is, you see. One must just recognise the fact, and make the best of it.'

Here Rosamund scoffed a little. -

'Janey on the sexes!'

'Well, I don't say I make any particular distinction myself; but then, you see, I don't seem somehow to come into quite such intimate contact with them as you do. Your circle being what is called extensive—I don't really believe you can help that, so you needn't look so crushed—well, you should practise a little adjustment. You see, I suppose if one is—well, more or less of a pleasing sort of person, you know, and not exactly plain, and able to talk more or less and amuse people, and all that sort of thing—well, it's about enough, without anything else.'

The words had an echo of reiteration in Rosamund's ears.

'And if, on the top of that, one takes a good deal of interest in other people's affairs, and consents to be sort of mother confessor and general adviser to all sorts and conditions of people——'

'I must know what the results are bound to be,' Rosamund ended hastily, with a sudden feeling that she could not hear the reiteration out any further.

'Oh,' Jane said calmly, 'he told you that, then. I expect he explained the case more thoroughly than I can, didn't he?' She looked at Rosamund's tired face consideringly. 'The odd thing is, you know, that you should need it explained.'

'It's so clear to everyone else, you mean.'

'No, not at all; but it should be so clear to you. You see, things have, as a rule, a knack of being fairly clear to you.'

'Have they? It doesn't seem so. Oh, I know

I'm horribly cocksure, of course. That, I suppose, is why I always feel impelled to force my miserable opinions upon other people. I can't let people alone—it all comes down to that, I suppose. He told me I had no right to be surprised, and I haven't, for it's my own doing entirely. Why did I never know before that I was densely, heavily stupid ?'

Jane took up the phrase before.

'It's a good deal your own doing, but not quite entirely. It is, of course, a good deal that you're interested, and make things your concern, but that isn't all. It wouldn't happen to everyone who did that, you know. Now—don't interrupt—I'm trying to think exactly what it is.'

Her considering regard, taking them in, assessed the outward properties at their value ; then, laying them aside, looked beyond. Some of Rosamund's own lucid discernment seemed to have passed to her.

'It must be a good deal the sort of way you have of seeing through a thing,' she concluded slowly—'hitting the right nail on the head, you know. You have a knack of understanding people and situations better than they do themselves ; so you save them the trouble of explaining, and at the same time throw a light on the thing. You go straight to the point, do you see, while other people are floundering among all the outer things—the side-issues. It's the knack you have, as I said, of seeing things clearly. Then, when once you've seen them, you're usually quite certain as to the rights of a thing. You know, really, a very great deal about everybody ; I suppose, if some of the people who come to you for sympathy knew quite how much you do know about them, they'd like you less, perhaps. But, on the whole,

people like to be understood ; it saves them trouble. Well, and then you care. That's not your doing ; it's your doing that you go out of your way to show that you care, but, however little you did that, you would care just the same, and people would know you cared. That's a thing which people, even the stupidest, always do know. Everybody doesn't care ; you say it's human nature, but it isn't universal human nature. I'm not saying, you know, that you're especially unselfish—I don't know that you are—but just that you do care about people's concerns ; you can't help it. If you see anybody hurt, or unhappy, or not behaving as you think they ought, or in any sort of a mess, you can't help caring ; though you can, of course, help interfering—that's another question. Well, that's why people come and tell you things—they know that you care. And you can't help that. What you can, of course, help is what comes after that—there your part of the business begins. And there,' said Jane very deliberately, 'I think you're wrong—quite wrong. I always have thought so. I rather think I've always told you so.'

'Yes,' said Rosamund, 'you have.'

'Not only,' Jane resumed, 'because of this sort of thing, which doesn't seem to me to matter so very badly—of course, if people choose to fall in love—which is a thing I should never do myself—they must just take the consequences ; and I don't suppose it hurts them particularly in the long run. It isn't specially because of that that I think you're wrong. Only I think people must be left to work out their own lives. And if you happen to be the kind of person who—well, rather gets an influence, you know—it seems to me that you should be pretty careful——'

'Not to use it,' Rosamund finished.

'Not to use much of it,' Jane amended. 'Each person's got their own business to manage, after all; it's no good helping them too much with it. And if people can't see their own mistakes or put up with their own worries for themselves, they're probably precious poor sort of people, and not in the least worth bothering about.'

Rosamund mused over it.

'All the same, you know,' she said, 'one's got to bother. I don't know whether one should or not; you may be right about it all, or you may be wrong—I don't know. But I do know that, whether one is wrong or right, one's got to care, and one's got to do what one can. Life, it seems to me, would be such a poor, purposeless, idiotic sort of business if one didn't. After all, if one does care—and if people know one cares—they have a sort of claim. One's no right to stand away when one's wanted, because one's afraid of doing the thing badly. I have done it badly often enough—I see that. Oh, it's a horribly tangled sort of question, but after all I believe the moral of it is simply that one mustn't be stupid. That's where the wrong comes in; it's on both sides, you see. They fail in perception and I fail in perception, and so between us we make a mess of it. Stupidity—that's at the root of most of the troubles of the world, I suppose.'

'Well,' Jane observed, 'it isn't a very curable evil, unfortunately.'

'No; the troubles of the world aren't very curable, either.'

Rosamund pondered them wearily.

Jane suddenly chuckled a little, thinking things over.

'Both of your lectures!' she scoffed. 'I wish I'd been there!'

Rosamund sighed.

'Oh, I wish you had. It might have prevented his, at least. It's the second, you know—once before on Johnny's behalf, and now on his own. . . . Janey, I've hurt him, you know, horribly.' Her voice broke on the words. 'One shouldn't—oh, one shouldn't hurt people like that! Talk of rights!—one's no right to do that. All this time I've been going on at him, meddling and worrying, till at last I've hurt him so badly that he's turned and told me so. It's—rather terrible, isn't it? And he's so ill, and so unhappy, and down on his luck without that; and I wanted so to comfort him. Instead, I've been, I suppose, the last straw. And—he's taken my advice.'

'Well, that's a good thing, anyhow.'

'Yes. I'm glad he said he'd take it before—'

'Before his own innings?'

'Because, if he hadn't, he certainly wouldn't have said it afterwards. And, having said so, he will. He is, you know, a person whom you can trust to abide by the letter of his word. Yes, he'll go home. I'm glad of that.'

Out of the tangle of obscured issues that one thing emerged, salient, achieved.

CHAPTER XXIII

THIS WORLD OF FOOLS

VERNEY, remarking stolidly to Archie Pattinson, 'I'm ready to go back to England whenever you are,' lit his rosy face with an abounding relief. Pattinson, to say the truth, had realized uncomfortably during the last few days that he had been brought up in front of a very stubborn and granite-like wall, against which he might use his battering-rams, such as they were, for an indefinite time with no shadow of result. He had come to asking himself, in embarrassed perplexity, what course he should pursue supposing his mission flatly failed.

'I suppose stay in Rome for the winter,' he had concluded. 'I certainly can't face Aunt Betty—I'm sure of that. Well, I dare say I might have a very pleasant winter. Only I hope, if it comes to that, that Verney's temper will get a little sweeter in course of time. He's such a sulky dog now; one never knows where to have him.'

He had written to his aunt: 'The situation threatens to become too much for me; I don't think I shall be able to carry it through. Hang it all, you should have come yourself, Aunt Betty. He's such a much bigger chap than I am, don't you see. For any sake, write and tell him he must come; or tell the Colonel to write. I can do no more, and my nerve is breaking.'

The answer came after the situation had been saved. Miss Prendergast was angry, and curtly said: 'Archie, you are a fool—a maundering infant! I can't write to Verney, as you know perfectly well; it would send him off in a huff to the other ends of the earth. Any letter the Colonel could indite in his present mood would have the same effect, only more so. Of course, if he chose to write a nice letter, it would be different; but then he won't. Oh, I really believe he can't, he's so worked himself up; so he'd much better leave it alone. (He knows I'm quarrelling with him, and looks hard the other way when we meet. But I'm bound to say he wears a hang-dog air.) If you can't bring that boy home—good heavens! you used to tip him when he was in Eton jackets; use your natural authority!—if you can't, I say, I wash my hands of you, and there'll be two excommunicated exiles who mayn't come home. So now you know.'

But before this ultimatum reached its destination, Miss Prendergast received an excitedly jubilant remark by telegram: 'All right I've done it we're coming.'

Miss Prendergast smiled a little cynically.

'I would wager long odds, my dear Harry, that *you* haven't done it. However, it seems somehow to have been done, which is all that matters. And now, will Verney have written to Francis, or does he contemplate simply arriving with no words wasted? But Francis hasn't had time to hear yet, of course, anyhow. I shall go and see him in two or three days, and he shall tell me about it. And he shall wire a pleasant reply, or I will know the reason why. Verney, of course, if he writes, will write a horrible, stilted, stuck-up letter. He'd much better not

write at all. Verney's letters are an interesting study in heredity. When he is in a pleasant mood they are almost exactly like his father's, and when he is in a temper they might have been written word for word by his grandfather. It's a thing the Ruths should try and remember not to do—to write letters when they are feeling cross. It brings out the most unpleasing aspect of their dispositions.'

Miss Prendergast did not have to go and see her old friend, which struck her as just as well. She met him when next she drove her pony-carriage into Penrith. He, riding through the town, came upon her sitting judicially in her trap outside the circulating library. Miss Prendergast, sitting like a despotic queen in her chariot, while the subservient attendants of the shop she was favouring revolved round her, much hectored and snubbed satellites, was as well known a feature of the town as the market square.

Colonel Ruth heard as he approached her incisive, 'No, thank you. I don't at all care about that. You must get me down the books on my list, you know; the others you get are of no use to me at all.' Then, holding another work a little from her, and subjecting it to the crushing scrutiny of the lorgnette: 'Oh, dear me, no, Peebles! You can take that in again at once, if you please. No, my good man, it was *not* on the list. I should never think of putting a work by that author on the list; she is an exceedingly silly woman. No, take it away, please. You can give me the quarterly and the "Life of Creighton," and nothing else this time.'

She broke off to hold up a detaining hand to

Colonel Ruth, who had recognised her with his touch of stiffness, and was riding on.

'You must wait a moment, Francis, please. Be quick, Peebles, with the books. There, thank you; and I hope you will have got something more next time, or I shall really, you know, have to send direct to Mudie's. Good afternoon. Francis!'

The Colonel had reined in, and was waiting for her. He put his horse at a foot's pace by her side, and together they ambled through the town of narrow streets and sudden wide squares. It was market day, and all the town and country were out and about: gaitered groups of farmers, standing in the squares, discussing cows with broad, excited volubility; gaitered gentlemen, going in or out of club or hotel, swinging riding-crops; tweed-clad ladies in traps or on foot, on marketing intent; broad farmers' wives, talking to each other from cart to cart.

Colonel Ruth and Miss Prendergast made their way through the crowd. Here and there they greeted an acquaintance as they passed; now and then people would turn to look at them, with kindly regard for the two familiar old figures, the Colonel, sitting his chestnut cob a little less erectly than of yore—this had only become noticeable during the past two years—but smart, military, well-groomed as ever, with his brown hat and leggings and neat riding-cane, and stern, keen old face. As to his companion, there seemed still to be the spirit of youth in the upright vigour of her carriage, and her firm, adroit, slightly despotic handling of the reins. Her keen, scrutinizing eyes rested on her friend, as he rode a little ahead of her; the slight failure of erectness in his carriage, of firmness in his

hands, was not lost on her. She knew that her friend Francis was ageing ; her keen eyes took a rather unusual softness. It was as if they were endorsing Rosamund Ilbert's pronouncement—that life was not easy to the old. The experience of her own age possibly taught her more than Rosamund knew on that subject.

They passed through the town and left it behind them, coming out upon the country road, that wound beneath the reddening trees. It was the last day of September ; all the smell of autumn, which ripens early on the fells, was in the air—the smell of it, and the glory of brightening colour and the infinite sadness and pathos of the age of the year.

'Peebles always behaves so badly about my books,' observed Miss Prendergast. 'The man's a fool. What do you think he accused me of having put on my list this time?' She mentioned the work with accentuated scorn. 'And the result is that I've come away with the "Life and Letters of Creighton." Oh, I know one's got to read it, but—well, I don't fancy it's going to amuse me wildly. There's something always about a Bishop—well, well, never mind. Well, Francis; you know Archie is coming home? He wired to me the other day.'

The Colonel looked round at her sharply.

'I heard it—from Verney. I got his letter this morning. Did he write to you?'

There was a curious mixture of suspicious jealousy and curt sullenness in the query beneath a very transparent veil of indifference. ('Francis's veils are always of the flimsiest description,' as Miss Prendergast was wont to remark.)

'Oh dear, no,' she hastened to reply. 'Archie

wrote to me and Verney to you, naturally. And is Verney coming too, then ?'

She very creditably succeeded in simulating curiosity.

'He is, apparently,' Colonel Ruth said gruffly, after a moment.

'Oh !' Miss Prendergast's air of pleased interest was accented. 'But that will be too delightful. Dear boys ! how refreshing to see them both. But I hear Verney isn't in the least well yet ; he has to take immense care. Quite sensible of him to come home and recruit. Rome, you know, during the rains, which will be coming on directly, is quite impossible. And when are they coming ? My vague nephew, of course, hasn't enlightened me as to dates ; he never does.'

The Colonel muttered something inaudible.

'Doesn't Verney say when either ?' inquired Miss Prendergast, who meant to have the thing clear.

'He leaves the date to me,' the Colonel answered her, looking at his horse's ears. 'Wants me to wire if it will be all right for him to arrive here next Thursday.'

'Oh !' Miss Prendergast nodded. 'And'—she paused a moment—'will it be all right ?'

Colonel Ruth said nothing. Miss Prendergast, watching the stern-cut profile, waited. There was pity in her keen scrutiny, with a touch of dry impatience.

'What shall you wire, Francis ?' she said rather softly, after a minute.

There was no apology for questioning between these two. Their concern with each other had been a thing tacitly recognised by both for some forty years.

'I suppose,' said the Colonel at length, 'he may as well come on Thursday as on any other day. I shall telegraph to that effect.'

Miss Prendergast's fine eyes lightened with quick scorn.

'To *that* effect!' She shut her lips sharply on the words, and tightened her grip on the reins. The pony jerked back his head in surprise. 'That doesn't sound very effusive, Francis.'

He turned and looked at her sombrely.

'No,' he said quietly. 'No; it is not intended to. Verney does not deserve that I should hold out both hands to him. He can't expect things to be as if nothing had happened. I shall receive him,' he went on, a little tremor in his quickening voice; 'I said I would receive him whenever he chose to be received, and I am glad he has chosen. I am glad if he is sorry, though he doesn't say much about that; but he can't expect things to be smoothed over for him in a moment, directly he chooses to say the word. I, too, shall have a few words to say.'

'I won't remind him of the prodigal son,' Miss Prendergast thought, 'because it's not a story I approve of; and anyhow, no one could have spent fifty odd years as Meyrick's father without seeing to the bottom of it. But what am I to do with him?'

For a minute or two they went on in silence.

'I wonder, Francis, if you quite see,' ventured Miss Prendergast at last, 'what an extraordinarily difficult position Verney has been in.'

He looked at her sharply, half wincing from the reference. She knew better than to expatiate on that position, only adding: 'A position too unusual, and too difficult, and—well, too delicate, to be judged quite by the simple standards of

obedience or disobedience. Of course he was disobedient.'

'He was disobedient,' the Colonel said gruffly ; 'he was disobedient, and he was insolent. He was grossly extravagant and dissipated ; he was a fool. I don't know,' he added, 'that he was not dishonest.'

She looked away from that hurt, which was seldom revealed to her. The Colonel's reference to it now proved him moved and stirred oddly out of himself.

'You ought to know it, Francis,' she said sharply ; 'it's ridiculous that you shouldn't know it. Why, even I know it, and I'm not Verney's grandmother. I wish you wouldn't make yourself out, Francis, less intelligent than you are. But even if I grant you the rest—all I plead is that his position was horribly difficult.'

'It was simply a question of honourable conduct or the opposite,' pronounced the Colonel, that to him simplifying all.

'Oh, well'—she moved impatiently—'it was chiefly, it seems to me, a question of sensible management, and Verney isn't old enough for that yet ; but have it as you like. All I ask you to see is that now the boy has done a rather fine thing. *Do* you see ? No, I don't believe you do in the least.'

'Fine ?' The Colonel stared at her from under his stern brows. 'What d'you mean ? It's common-sense, of course ; I see that.'

'Of course it's common-sense. But when one is in a temper, and thoroughly offended and on one's dignity, it may be a rather fine thing to crawl down to mere common-sense. For one of you, anyhow,' she rapped out ; then was sorry for that addition, Meyrick, the ever present,

rising, a supple ghost, untrammelled by pride true or false, between them. She saw the shadow of him in his father's stern eyes, and combated it with: 'Oh, Verney's got a horrid temper, you know. Atrocious; and for obstinacy there's no one to touch him. A sulky, perverse, ill-conditioned boy,' she summed it up, with zest in the over-statement, emphasizing it with light flicks on the pony's collar.

It had its effect. Verney's grandfather drew himself a little more erect.

'I thought you were fond of the boy,' he observed, a little stiffly.

Miss Prendergast eyed him with resigned desperation.

'Oh, you did, did you? Well, then, I grant it you; he's the most sweet-tempered, tractable, docile young man alive. There! do you like that better? And that being so, isn't it a shame to pour cold water on his warm young feelings?—as you would, you know, by the sort of telegram you seem to be contemplating, and by your subsequent reception of him, as you at present plan it. Now, look here, Francis, the boy has swallowed his pride—and it can't have been a nice mouthful, though you do think him so sweet and docile—he has climbed down; he is sorry, and wants to be friends; can't you climb down, too, a little? It isn't entirely fair, you know, to leave it all to him; after all, you're the eldest. Don't treat him when he comes as an unreformed criminal, or as a reformed one either, for he'll like that even less. Just let the stupid, stupid business blow over and be forgotten. Oh, you know you're both sick of it! Why can't you let it alone? If Verney did wrong—well, he's been punished enough, in all conscience. You don't

suppose he hasn't hated the wretched business from first to last. Of course he has.'

'Verney doesn't mind things much,' the Colonel said gruffly, switching his leg with his cane.

'Yes, he does,' she contradicted him. 'In theory he doesn't. He's an absurd creature theoretically, a kind of monster; but in practice he minds immensely. One can stick pins into him at every point. He's got, you know, that kind of conceited pride which makes him like to have things going thoroughly well with him all round; if his concerns get into a mess, he's aggrieved. Anything like failure or disgrace he feels very badly indeed. Oh yes, Verney minds.'

The Colonel seemed to ponder over it, ruminatingly.

'His letter,' he said presently, 'doesn't sound as if he had taken things particularly to heart.'

Miss Prendergast flicked grimly over the pony's ears.

'Oh, I'm sure his letter is atrocious; the letter of a very silly young man, or of a Ruth, to put it shortly. I'm convinced I could repeat his letter to you word for word.'

'It is very short,' said the Colonel simply. 'He merely asks if it will be convenient for him to come home on Thursday. He says, too, that he is sorry to have displeased me. He regards that, of course, as the apology I stipulated for as a condition of his reception at home.'

'Oh,' she said, impatiently smiling, 'don't use such long words, Francis. If you talk to him like that when he comes, he'll become a criminal lunatic in good earnest, especially now his brain is weak after fever. No; you really mustn't talk to each other. Just go and shoot pheasants

together. You do it so much better, you know.'

The Colonel said nothing; he rode on quietly, with head a little bent.

The turning of the road that led up to Miss Prendergast's house came into sight in front of them. She turned suddenly towards her friend, her shrewd old face very soft.

'Meet the boy half-way, Francis,' she said quickly. 'He'll want it, badly.'

He looked round at her drearily, all the sadness and the weariness and the stern suspicion that were the gleanings of his long years looking bitterly from his face, strangely and half-incongruously from his blue, youthful eyes.

'Want it?' he repeated after her slowly; 'he only wants one thing from me—money. Nothing else. There is never anything else in it. They must have money; when they want it they come crawling to pick it up. Then they go away—till they want it again.'

He said it with a slow, bitter deliberation, his stern blue eyes gazing away into the yellowing autumn distance to where the Abbots Verney woods ran sparsely down the hill.

Miss Prendergast's pony, under the first genuine flick he had received, started violently, and broke into a trot.

'If that's the sort of thing you're going to say,' his driver cried angrily, 'the sooner we separate the better. You're perfectly abominable. I'm surprised the boy should come home at all; I wouldn't in his place! Let me tell you, it's very much more than you deserve that he should. And if you're going to say that sort of thing to him, I assure you you'll strain all the good resolutions he's probably coming home full of beyond

what they'll stand ; they'll smash up like so many eggs, and he'll go off again to the other end of the earth and give you up as a bad job.'

The last words had to be called over her shoulder, as she was borne out of speaking distance. Her friend Francis had succeeded, as he frequently did, in making her thoroughly and extremely angry. The pony was handled with no gentleness for the rest of his way home.

'Oh, this world of fools!' she muttered; 'I've no patience with it. Francis and Verney, and that idiot Peebles, and good Bishops, whose lives one must read—oh, I'm sick of them all!'

Colonel Ruth rode slowly up the Abbots Verney hill. Riding, even slowly, tired him strangely of late. He glanced aside at the sparse woods as he passed them. Possibly, he was thinking of to-morrow's sport. It was the first time, since they had left school, that none of his grandsons had been at Abbots Verney for the beginning of the pheasant shooting. Now, Roger was on the North-west Frontier; Humphrey was shepherding his parish in the next county; Charlie was down in the South, taking over a temporary land agency (the Colonel had a premonition that all Charlie's jobs would be of a temporary nature); and Verney—well, Verney was not there, either.

Of the four, Verney had been the best shot.

CHAPTER XXIV

LEATHER CHAIRS

'So here we part,' said Archie Pattinson, infusing, according to his custom, a note of pathos into the situation.

They stood outside Penrith Station in the grey, late afternoon, and to each of them a groom from a trap touched his hat. The groom who welcomed Pattinson smiled a pleased smile; the Abbots Verney groom was a more undemonstrative young man, and a new importation, strange to Verney.

Pattinson said, 'You'll come and see Aunt Betty as soon as you feel like it? She'll ferret you out if you don't, you know.'

'Thanks. I should like to come. Remember me to her, will you?'

'Oh, dear me!' Pattinson shivered unobtrusively in the chill air. 'What a land we have come back to! It's been raining—and it's going to rain—and I believe it always rains here, doesn't it? I say, Verney, we had a good old time—what? Have you got a cigarette? Thanks so much. I don't think I can bear this, you know—can you? Good-bye, old man. You look awfully ill, don't you know—oh, well, I beg your pardon. That crossing was the deuce—what?'

Verney took the reins from the groom, and drove away through the grey, straggling town squares.

It was not a nice afternoon ; it was one of those chill autumn days that are born and die in murky rain, which lifts for gusty intervals through the day. This hour, between afternoon and evening, was one of the intervals. The purple, shadowing sky hung sullenly, blue with rain to come ; in the west, brooding above Saddleback, was a layer of dull, tawny orange. The desolate wind swept southwards, cold and wet with the rain that was falling upon the northerly fells. The wet road gleamed murkily pale before Verney's eyes as he left the town behind him ; the wheels slurred dismally through the mud and the coldly shining puddles, and the sodden mould of yellow leaves. Above, the telegraph-wire sang its dreary monotone in the blowing wind. Verney shivered a little. The gusts of the wind were bringing the leaves down in wet, sudden eddies. Autumn ripens early on the fells. It was a world of gold and red he had come back to ; the wet road that stretched before him was an avenue bordered with pure gold all a-flutter—the early, pale gold of the limes. All round, east and west, the hills, where he could see them, were aflame with the ruddy hue, tawny now under the last orange gleam of the dying day.

The trap sloughed on through the wet mud. Two miles and a half along the road a wood path led up the left. Verney pulled up here.

‘I shall walk by the woods,’ he said, and climbed out.

He struck up along a wet road that ran, ascending gently, through the sodden fragrance of a wood. He crushed wet beech-nuts, and the golden fans of the chestnuts, and the gold-brown, mouldering oak-leaves, and slippery, wet brown fir-needles under foot as he walked. The sweet,

damp, stealthy breath of the woods stole round him ; it was full of subtle, keen memories. If he had shut his eyes he would have known himself to be walking nowhere but in the Abbots Verney woods. It had nothing in common with the sweet, warm, exotic fragrance of the ilex-wood by the Alban Lake, this damp, living breath of the wet bracken and the mouldering gold leaves.

It became so dark in the woods that he could only just see the wet path that wound in front of him. It had begun to rain again outside ; the rain dripped through the yellow leaves upon him wherever the trees thinned a little.

The wood held an infinite sadness ; the wind moaned a little desolately in the tops of the trees, though one felt none of it in the path below ; the fall of the year was set to a dirge in a minor key. There seemed an infinite sad dreariness in the dripping brambles that lay across the path with their late, sodden blackberries.

The wood-path ran climbing up to a little wicket-gate, and there ended.

Verney came out of the woods on to the bare hillside. There the wind, sweeping desolately, buffeted him in the face, and flung the dead leaves about his feet as he walked.

The evening was coming on quickly. To the right the straggling village sprawled up the hill, twinkling out its cottage lights into the gathering gloom. The ruts of its wet road gleamed beneath the waning day.

Verney struck into the road above the village, and climbed the hill between the sodden heather and the dead gorse, which still here and there flared feebly into tarnished, scentless blossom.

Above him, in the murky gloom of the evening, Abbots Verney crested the hill.

As he looked up at it a gust of wind swept down across the wet heather, buffeting the rain into his face, and the woods moaned below as it struck them.

Verney looked up to where the proud melancholy of the Abbey shadowed the sky. Through the surging golden trees that shut it in its stern lines stood invincibly noble, dark with the pathos and the desolation of the centuries. The little turreted towers of the gate guarded the stone bridge across the moat, which was probably now full of the autumn raining. Beyond it stretched the garden, with its great yellow trees that clustered up to the house. On the right hand was the long red brick wall of the fruit-garden, glowing damply through the stout ivy that strove to veil it; and above the wall the top boughs of the apple-trees shook, still bearing fruit yet unripened. The Abbots Verney apples often never came to maturity in the chill, early autumn. On the left ran the little grey cloisters, ending in the chapel, with its dark steeple and cross rising into the cloudy evening. The great rose-window that lit the long refectory was a dark blur; it gleamed back no red light to meet the sombre falling of the day.

Elsewhere in the house there were lights. On the ground-floor the window of the library gleamed out between the trees.

There, no doubt, Colonel Ruth was sitting, waiting. The thought had a familiar iteration to Verney. His grandfather had so often sat in the library waiting. Nearly all the interviews he could remember had taken place in the dark, quiet room which that gleaming light marked. In the dark, quiet room his grandfather sat, no doubt, in an armchair of hard, shining leather.

Verney used to stand opposite to that chair, pinching his fingers together in his pockets, with a nervous frown over a stolid, straight regard. He remembered it very well. . . .

Again, as he crossed the bridge over the dark, swirling water, the wet wind, with its odours of sodden heather and mouldering woods, smote him stormily, moaning about his ears. He shivered a little, breasting it, and turned up along a side-path into the drive, where the gravel crunched wet beneath his feet. He was ahead, no doubt, of the trap, which had driven round by the carriage-road.

So he came to the hall-door, and, opening it, went into the house. The hall was empty; there was no fire in the wide hearth; it wore an uninhabited look. When the younger generation were at home, they lived in the oak-panelled, sweet-smelling place, which was pleasantly hung with tapestries and spread with rugs, and was a very curiosity shop of weapons, old and new, and sporting trophies. The second generation, as personified by Mrs. Donald Ruth, found the hall draughty, and lived in the drawing-room, when she was, to her chagrin, spending her time at Abbots Verney. The first generation sat in the library, in a hard leather chair. There was, to the soldierly mind of the first generation, a flavour of unmanliness in the luxury of the lounge-chairs that the third generation purchased at Oxford and brought home to put about the hall. Charlie and Verney in particular had no mind to sit erect against hard leather backs. Verney caught sight of his own favourite chair; it was a large, deep wicker lounge, with green cushions. He had purchased it in his first term at Oxford, at Elliston and Cavell's. He had been wont to

inform his grandfather that he could work in no other. It stood now with an air of eclipse, pushed back against the wall. Verney concluded that Charlie was not at home. He wondered if anyone was in the house besides his grandfather. Most of the family he knew to be away; it was possible that his aunt was staying there. He was not devoted to his aunt, but he rather hoped she was. It would, as Pattinson would have phrased it, lessen the *embarrass*.

Meanwhile, the library-door stood closed at the end of the hall.

Verney looked at it, wished he did not feel so sick, pulled himself together with a desperate 'Oh, hang,' passed a rather unsteady hand over his forehead, which was oddly cold and damp, and walked up the hall.

He pushed open the heavy door, and went in.

The air of old books rose suddenly to meet him, enveloping him with their vague reminder. He had always connected that leathery, musty air with his grandfather and the leather chairs.

The long room was gloomy; the chandelier in the middle only partially lit it. The tall portraits ranged round the walls loomed out, half revealed, like ghosts in the twilight dusk. There was a fire in the grate. By it stood a leather armchair, shining darkly where the light touched it. Verney knew of old how the dark leather and the yellow brass studs in it caught the firelight. It stood with its back towards the door. The light from the chandelier fell softly on the grey head above the straight leather back.

At the swinging-to of the heavy door Colonel Ruth turned and looked over his shoulder, then rose to his feet.

Verney came towards him. For a moment,

while he came, neither spoke. Colonel Ruth's blue eyes hung on his grandson's face—keen, wistful, stern, a little startled; startled, possibly, because he had not remembered Verney so gaunt and so white and so hollow-eyed.

They shook hands. It was as if they were both tongue-tied. The unlaid ghosts of what had been seemed to stalk between them, choking them into silence. It was, of course, the younger who found words.

‘How are you, grandfather?’

Then he felt oddly dizzy, and leaned a little with one hand on the leather back of the armchair.

‘You look ill,’ Colonel Ruth said gruffly. ‘It was a sharp attack you had, wasn’t it?’

‘It was a beastly crossing,’ muttered Verney, his voice sounding to himself very far away.

Then he sat down suddenly in the armchair, and leaned his forehead on one hand and shut his eyes. He really felt horribly sick. The smell of brandy made him open his eyes. His grandfather was standing over him, holding a glass to his lips.

‘Drink it down. Feeling faint, hey? You’ll be all right presently.’

Verney drank it and sat up staighter, his head clearing a little.

‘It was such a beastly crossing,’ he said again, feeling inordinately ashamed of himself.

His grandfather nodded.

‘Quite right; you’ll be better directly. I expect you haven’t pulled up yet after this fever. You don’t look well, you know,’ he repeated gruffly, his eyes still scanning the white, gaunt face and bonily emaciated frame. The shock they had given him had a little altered the situation for him, in that first moment. He had not been quite

sure how he meant to greet the prodigal; the prodigal had rather taken matters into his own hands.

'Oh, I'm fit enough,' said Verney listlessly. 'It'll take a little time to put on condition, I suppose.' Silence fell again; it lurked insidiously all the time as they spoke, waiting to spring. It sprang now. Verney flung it off hastily. 'I hope things have been going all right,' he said. 'How is everyone?'

'Quite well, I think,' said the Colonel. 'Charlie, you know, is with Sir Robert Bennet at Lindfield. He's doing, so far, as well as can be expected, I believe.'

Then, because both knew to whom, in part at least, attached the blame of Charlie's late failure, that subject lapsed. Verney had a dreary sense that most paths they hit upon would find themselves pulled up sharply by these terminating walls. As long, however, as they did not follow the paths to the bitter end, and run their heads against the hopeless, impenetrable stone, the situation was not lost.

'Your aunt is here,' said Colonel Ruth. 'Your uncle, I believe, is coming home from China next month.'

Verney was glad that his aunt was there.

'How are the pheasants?' he asked next.

'Pretty fair. But I haven't been out very much; only two days. Sturt has been rather vexed about it. He'll be pleased to see you, I dare say.'

'I hope you've been pretty well,' said Verney.

He noticed for the first time the stoop in the trimly-built figure, the new lines cut about the keen old face. It seemed to him that his grandfather had grown a good deal older in the last

year. His conventional remark was genuine ; not, as those before it, to make conversation.

‘Very fairly well, thank you,’ the answer came stiffly. (The Ruths, Miss Prendergast complained, were always grumpy if you mentioned their health.) Verney knew better than to tell him that he did not look it. It was the Colonel next time who hurled back the springing silence. ‘Did you have a good journey?’

Verney related to him where it had been good and where bad. It took some minutes.

‘I’m very glad to have arrived,’ he ended, and added, after a moment’s pause, moved by the silence to qualify his tentative remark: ‘There are no Germans round Abbots Verney, anyhow; and if there were, there’s room to keep clear of them.’

The Colonel nodded. He had preserved a quite unnoticeable and natural silence during the momentary pause which had followed Verney’s expression of pleasure in his arrival. But it had been enough to show Verney that advances of that sort were not going to be met half-way.

Rosamund Ilbert would doubtless have said: ‘What does it matter? Make them, all the same. Hurl yourself at his head, never mind whether you bore him or not; it’s good for him, and it’s your business to do it.’

Verney could almost hear her saying it. But he was not Rosamund Ilbert, but a Ruth, and he drew back. He had been sounding a little his status, and he knew that he was in ignominious disgrace. He had known it before; his apology and his home-coming had not wiped out that. He wondered when it would be mentioned between them. That would be a bad hour when it came; he shrank nervously away from it.

He wondered a little, distastefully, if he ought to repeat his apology by word of mouth. He decided that it was not his part to introduce the subject; it would, no doubt, be forced upon him soon enough. Meanwhile, he was thankful for present mercies. He had not thought that the ashes of strife would be allowed to rest for so long.

'You must have found it warm in Rome,' said the Colonel, with a touch of grimness, looking at him in the old way, sharply, beneath shaggy brows.

'Yes,' Verney assented briefly; 'it was warm.'

'Pity you didn't make up your mind to leave it a little earlier,' said the Colonel, an inflection of irony in his gruff tones. 'It would have saved you some trouble, you know.'

'Yes,' said Verney again, pulling himself together to meet what he surmised was coming.

'You haven't done yourself much good by putting it off,' said the Colonel, glancing at the white face.

Verney said nothing; perhaps his so manifest pallor and weariness did him more service than he knew. The Colonel, who had not meant five minutes before to let his hounds out upon that course, called them off with a visible effort. He did not find it easy to keep them in order; it was, perhaps, one of those things which the old do not find easy, but he had no desire to set them on his grandson's track to-night. Explanations and rebukes could wait; perhaps, in his inmost soul, he knew he would get little good of them, however long they waited. But his soreness and anger forbade him to admit it. The boy had done wrong; he could not be treated as if nothing had happened. But though he hovered about the subject, he, too, flinched, and shrank

from approaching it with too definite words. The things that lay between them were, to him, too terrible to touch. If he blamed Verney, he would infallibly go off into side-issues, skirting the main business.

‘It will be dinner-time in half an hour,’ said Colonel Ruth, rising.

The gruff tones were matter-of-fact. Verney stood up; his relief was written on his face.

Coming down to the drawing-room afterwards, he found his aunt there with his grandfather. She greeted him in her customary not markedly effusive manner. She never gave more than three fingers to anyone; even her husband and sons she would probably have preferred to greet so, only they took the matter into their own hands, and kissed her stolidly on the cheek.

Verney and she always exchanged amiable smiles; they were not attached to each other, but it amused them, as a rule, to hold intercourse together. Verney’s present situation entertained Mrs. Ruth considerably; her father-in-law’s attitude had interested her through the summer, now she hoped to find a fresh diversion in her nephew’s. She had tried once or twice tentatively to discuss the state of affairs with Miss Betty Prendergast, being quite acute enough to discern that that lady was, so to speak, ‘in the know.’ But Miss Prendergast, on the subject of the Ruth concerns, was not to be drawn.

Mrs. Ruth, after the tender of the three fingers, pursed up her lips for a moment; if she had been a man, she would have whistled.

‘Goodness, Verney! You’re lookin’ pulled down! I should think you’ve lost quite a stone since I saw you last, haven’t you?’

‘I’ve not weighed myself lately,’ Verney said.

'I never had any pennies at the stations, and Pattinson wouldn't lend me any.'

'Well'—his aunt's eye measured him critically—'I hope you're goin' to pull up a bit now. You'll give the neighbourhood a fit if you go about lookin' like that.'

Verney had never before been so glad of his aunt's presence as he found himself that night at dinner. The fact that she sat at one end of the table saved the situation. Without her it would have been oppressively nerve-straining; as it was, the insidiously lurking silence ceased to be formidable, it had no chance to spring. Paths might be followed without fear, though some of those which his aunt struck did not appeal especially to Verney's taste. She spoke of Rome.

'I heard in June, you know, from Centurio. He said he'd met you in the streets and asked you to dinner, but you couldn't go. Silly of you; Centurio gives one of the best dinners in Rome.'

Mrs. Ruth's eyes twinkled a little.

'My heart smote me,' the Marchese had written; 'the poor youth has gone into perpetual mourning for his father's sins. So pale, so dejected, so meagre; so—pardon me!—morose. My invitation was flung back in my teeth. He will have no traffic, that young man, with those who are aware of his delightful father's vagaries. I was, as I say, consumed with pity and compunction, as the unfortunate to whose lot it had fallen to call attention to those vagaries.'

'Centurio thought you looked ill even then, you know,' added Mrs. Ruth. 'He was quite anxious about you.'

'Very kind of him,' said Verney.

At the mention of Centurio the old stiff defiance had come over him.

'I expect you didn't see much of anyone after I left Rome,' Mrs. Ruth said. 'Everyone went away. What about the Ilberts? Have you seen them at all?'

'Once or twice. I went to see them at Albano the other day,' said Verney, with a defiant pride in showing his aunt that he was not ashamed to go and call on his acquaintances. She, beyond all people, had the power to sting his listlessness into stubborn resentment.

When Mrs. Ruth left the dining-room, Verney, cutting the end off a cigar, plunged desperately into inquiries. There were a number of things one might ask; he had not thought of nearly all of them in the library. He was seized with zeal for knowledge concerning Roger's whereabouts, Humphrey's approaching wedding, his uncle's prospects of return from his travels. Stretching further, his curiosity embraced the doings of two counties in detail. He was enlightened with a trifle more of elaboration, perhaps, than Colonel Ruth as a rule used; it is possible that to him, too, the situation called at present for a veneer. Later, when its outline had more determined itself, it might emerge in the raw. Verney was bent desperately on postponing that day; perhaps he hoped against hope that it might be averted altogether. Things might conceivably, as Rosamund had said, be slurred over; but every open facing of them made the slurring-over process more problematical.

Colonel Ruth, less logical and consistent than his grandson, could not, had he been asked, have said what were his intentions, or what his hopes. At present he was concurring with Verney, and taking the easiest course.

All the time, as they talked, fear lurked behind

the eyes of the younger; those of the elder seemed to hold a doubt, stern, questioning, bitter, and a little wistful.

Verney was by nature conversational. Had it been one of his cousins in his place, silence would have fallen almost after the first. Verney carried it along—he had to do the most of it himself—but it ran its course at last.

Verney got up, and dropped his cigar-end into the grate. His nerves were strained to breaking-point.

‘I suppose I had better go and unpack a bit,’ he said.

The Colonel nodded absently.

When Verney had gone he still sat on at the table, resting his elbow upon it, and playing, with fingers that trembled a little, with his wine-glass. He stared, beneath his drawn-down white brows, at the pushed-back chair at the side of the table. It had been Meyrick Ruth’s place thirty and forty years ago. To-night it had been Verney’s.

The ghosts of the past were bitterly round him.

CHAPTER XXV

THE MINOR KEY

THE days that followed were days of moaning winds and the swirling of dead, wet leaves, and gusty rain tumbling out of a grey, sodden sky. Autumn swept desolately over the fells. The chill of it held Abbots Verney in its grip. The Abbey became, in stormy weather, a grim place of desolation, standing up against the four winds of heaven, haunted by their howling voices. It was not, to say the truth, in very good repair.

Mrs. Donald Ruth complained of it peevishly from morning till night. Her nephew was desperately afraid that she would leave it. He did not wish her to leave it; her presence helped to preserve the veneer. He talked to her; the Colonel talked to her—in so far as he talked at all. If she went, Verney knew that his grandfather and he would sit in silence, now that the desperate courage of the first evening was over. By common consent they did not sit together after dinner, but left the room with Mrs. Ruth. The Colonel usually went to the library; Verney played chess with his aunt. He had usually beaten her of old; in these days she always beat him.

‘Rome’s been awfully bad for your intelligence, Verney,’ she told him. ‘You’ve come back quite stupid, you know.’

In the mornings Verney sometimes strolled round the place with his grandfather. Both smoked; neither spoke much; the Colonel showed, indeed, little recognition of his grandson's presence.

'It's no goodfunking,' Verney had decided ruefully. 'If he's going to say things he'll say them, and I can't get out of them by keeping out of the way. He's got a right to talk the damned thing out if he wants to, of course. But I hope he won't—I hope he won't. Anyhow, I suppose it's my business to make myself as pleasant as he'll let me. It's precious hard, though, when he's wishing me at Jericho the whole time—seems such beastly cheek, too.'

Verney a year ago would possibly not have decided that it was his business to be, as he put it, aggressively pleasant. He would have allowed his grandfather to set the tone as he chose. Now his days were days of long, conscious effort.

The situation was a little nerve-straining to a person lately recovered from illness. The fever, and the months preceding it in which he had painted Rome, had left their mark on Verney. His nerves were rather poor; his temper was rather irritable; his spirits were more than rather at a low ebb.

But the Abbots Verney atmosphere had at least the merit of obviating the necessity of being festive. Gaiety accorded ill with the dignified gloom of the place; there had always been a note of unseemliness in the boisterous spirits of the young generations who had been reared in it. Just now the house and its inhabitants eminently suited one another. Their accord bored Mrs. Ruth, who liked to be amused.

'One doesn't expect the Colonel to be lively,

of course,' she complained; 'but Verney used to be rather an amusin' fellow once. Silly fellow! What does it matter if he did have a row with his grandfather? He's made it up now—very sensible of him, too. I always said Verney knew which side his bread was buttered; he's not Meyrick's son for nothin'. I suppose he's depressed because his grandfather doesn't open both arms to him; but then he can't have expected that. It takes the old Colonel a long time to get over things—he must know that. I must say they're gettin' along better than I expected, on the whole. I don't believe they've had a flare up at all. But their way of talkin' to each other—horsehair chairs aren't in it! And I have to be go-between—nice position for me, you know! It amused me at first, but the fun wears off after a time.'

This plaint was delivered to Miss Prendergast, who listened with a smile a little grim.

'A cheerful household, I don't doubt,' she commented. 'The Ruth family at its Ruthiest.'

She did not care to discuss the situation any further.

Verney had come to see her on the afternoon after his arrival. That was before he had succumbed, as he did more or less later, to the gloomily taciturn influence of Abbots Verney. His mood of desperate conversationalism had still been upon him; uneasily conscious that Miss Prendergast probably knew all that there was to know, and discerned a good deal more that his grandfather had not discerned and never would discern, he caught at trivial topics as a refuge. He told her of the doings of all their common Roman acquaintances; she played up tactfully, and made inquiries as to which she felt not the least curiosity.

She mentioned the Ilberts.

'I hope you thought them charming. Charles Ilbert, you know, used to be a very great friend of mine.'

'Yes,' said Verney, 'I liked him very much. He was rather good to me, you know,' he added.

She nodded.

'He let us know about you, of course. He would; he has a kind heart, Charles Ilbert, though he pretends to have none at all. That's sheer affectation; he was always an affected young fellow, as I used to tell him. And his wife was pretty—but charmingly pretty when I knew her best—and not at all too clever. And the girl, Rosamund—she is attractive, I remember—amusing—will probably have plenty of attention all her life, I remember thinking when last I saw her. Clever, too, I shouldn't wonder, and can see a more or less inobvious joke. As far as I remember, she didn't bore me when I talked to her—and girls usually do. You liked her, I hope?'

'I think I liked them all,' said Verney.

The rather too manifest cudgelling of his memory, with brows knitted to the effort, drew her eyes upon him quickly. They dwelt there for a moment, as if taking in new possibilities.

Then she changed the subject.

The last topic she broached that afternoon was that of his former views on the marriage system, as expounded to her a year ago.

'Have you grown any older?' she inquired, 'or do the dogmas yet hold water? Remember, I charged you to come and tell me when they began to leak.'

'They are still water-tight,' said Verney gravely. 'I may have grown older—eleven months older—but the principles of my youth were sound.'

There was a scarcely perceptible second of waiting pause ; the waiting was on Miss Prendergast's side, and had reference to old habit ; for here should, by good rights, have followed a diatribe on the world's systems, a sublimely sweeping readjustment of nature and law. It did not come ; she had not in the least expected it to come ; creeds and theories might be water-tight, but they lacked motive force, lying like a becalmed ship ; the wind of the young reforming zeal, which had given the ship impetus, flapped the sails inertly. To put it briefly, Verney was bored. Neither his own nor anyone else's scheme of existence amused him in the least.

'Father—grandfather—fever—hot weather—hunger—postcards—' Miss Prendergast ran it over, musing—'and ? Would there be anything else to it ? There might be—and there mightn't. On the whole, I shouldn't wonder if there were. How horribly unwarrantable of me to be trying to force my way behind that really creditable smile. Only, dear boy, you haven't altogether got it, you know ; because it used to be with your eyes—just like Meyrick's. Now they don't even look me in the face—again like Meyrick's—on certain occasions. And if you look—or rather don't look—at your grandfather like that, why, the probabilities are, I fear, that the resemblance will strike him ; even Francis is open to being hit by a resemblance on occasion—that resemblance, anyhow. It's the unresemblances that he somehow misses.'

Verney, with his creditable smile, took himself home.

At Abbots Verney smiles won no credit ; they seemed rather, in that strained atmosphere, to be almost an insolence. More, they began to vaguely

appear to Verney as possibly being a rash drawing upon himself of some emphasis, sudden and terrible, of the situation which his smiling might be taken to ignore. A child in disgrace will, as a rule, find it to its advantage to show some recognition of the fact. It had best tune its demeanour to a chastened key, if it wishes to avoid over-emphasis on the part of its elders.

There was small difficulty as to that; the difficulty rather lay in not letting the minor key become too pronounced. It became, as a matter of fact, exceedingly pronounced.

Verney, tramping moodily about by himself in the wet Autumn mists, brooded sometimes over his present situation, sometimes over his recent past history.

Retrospect, while ameliorating nothing, yet served to elucidate. Like Rosamund, Verney was working things out, slowly, painfully, till he attained, in the end, to a dead, sombre lucidity of comprehension. To the fall to normality of his temperature, possibly, as well as to the inevitable reaction from his hot resentment, he might have ascribed the change in his point of view. He told himself drearily that he had been, in that as in other things, a quite unmitigated ass from first to last. He told himself how he had been privileged to know a person of charm—at the manifold memory of that compelling charm he pressed his lips bitterly together, seeing again the sudden laughter of the quizzical eyes.

He had known a person who, whatever one said of her, and one might say many things, was wholly lovable.

Retrospect showed Verney the story of their

intercourse from first to last ; the easy friendship of the early days, his sudden readmission to it through the passport of his hurt, her comprehension and frank concern for him at the last.

He came thus to a vivid realization of her friendship ; it was a thing not to be lightly flung back. He had flung it back ; he had turned and railed at her because it was not more. Seeing it in this aspect, he was prepared to say that he had had of her already more than he had deserved at her hands. He declared himself a fool ; there had been no logic in his anger, for he could and did ask nothing of her ; simply, in inconsequent resentment, he had reproached her for what she had given him, making its extent and its limitations alike a cause of complaint.

He had told her hotly that it had been her business to know ; but, after all, the mistake, the failure in apprehension, had been less hers than his. For he had neglected his opportunities of knowing her as she was ; perhaps such knowledge was not to be obtained vicariously. He had obtained it now, not vicariously, and for good and all ; and so understanding, blame and anger had no place in the business. He looked at it instead drearily, with a sad recognition of the bitter inevitability of it ; for it was the inevitability of personality and temperament, than which life knows no more unrelaxing law.

He admitted for her that she must go her way. Knowing her as he did, he knew that for her any other way would not have been life, as she understood its significance. It was not for him to cramp and restrict that significance ; he even admitted, so seeing it in this hour of reaction,

that it was, as it were, a larger and richer interpretation than his own. All he said of her—and still he said it—was that she should have understood; she who divined so much should have divined that. His point of view should, in that matter as in others, have been evident to her. Strangely, she had not been aware of it; on that initial ignorance she had built up the house which had fallen in shattering, bruising fragments about their heads.

Yet that house had not, after all, been for him a house of delusion. He had never sanely imagined it to be other than it was. Even in that hour's accusing bitterness, when he had railed at her for her house and her ignorance, he had been shaken only under the shock of a more complete, more final realization. Perhaps he, as well as she, knew vaguely that, as she had phrased it, if she had cared it would have been wholly different. The knowledge of it hurt him irrevocably.

He could not take her friendship from her; it burnt him to touch. But he told himself that he must one day throw off, as it were, the burden of his folly, justifying himself by admitting, with a sane reasonableness of generosity, her full right, as he saw it, to follow her own way. She must not think always that he obscured that right to himself. It would be unfair to each of them. He would clear himself of that in time; then at that he would leave it. Verney hated, above most things, to rest under the aspersion of unreasonableness.

So, in these grey days he worked it out, as Rosamund had worked it out, evolving, as she had, the terse moral that it is a pity to be a fool. For him, though, the moral was very incidental,

very much by the way; it was the bald facts which alone mattered. No moral would ameliorate or enrich the bare crudity of these facts.

The grey, barren desolation of them made him sick to contemplate. They seemed wearily one with the wet, blurred world of moaning woods and faint skies. It was an ugly land to which he had come back; he had forgotten the grey sombreness of it. It was an ugly land which he had left; he still winced from the white glare of the city of desolation in the burnt plains. It was a world of ugly lands and ugly facts; there was no escape from either.

After more than one visit to Miss Prendergast of the conversational, and, as she put it, creditable type, Verney paid one of a different nature. It was on the way back from a walk with his grandfather; the Colonel had stopped at a farm to see a tenant. Verney walked into Miss Prendergast's drawing-room, shook hands with an air curiously mechanical, and sat down by the fire. The unlit room was in dusk, but the firelight showed him oddly pale, with something of a drawn look about the lips. He fell to poking the fire, jabbing it viciously. Miss Prendergast's intuition showed her a man at the furthestmost end of a tether, nerves tugging reason and self-control to pieces. She supposed he would swear before long. He did, softly and to himself, apparently under the impression that he was indulging in wordless reflections.

'You had better stay and have dinner with me,' she remarked, tranquilly cutting the pages of the 'Life of Creighton.'

He looked up then.

'Thank you; I'm afraid I must get back home.'

‘Have a game of chess?’ she suggested.

He swung to his feet, the brass poker still in his hand.

‘I play the beastly game every night with my aunt,’ he said querulously, and dropped the poker with a clatter into the grate.

The ensuing pause, though she did not mean it to do so, being indeed consumed by nothing but an immense pity, commented sufficiently on his remark and action for him to return a little to the normal decencies.

‘I beg your pardon; I didn’t mean to be so rude—or to make such a row with that thing. It—that is, I dropped it.’

‘So I saw. Never mind it. Sit down again, Verney, and talk to me. You’re very opportune; it’s too dark for the bishop, and too light for the lamps.’

Verney did not sit down; he stood and stared into the fire, his hands in his pockets. The firelight glistened on his wet leggings and breeches.

‘It’s been raining, hasn’t it?’ observed Miss Prendergast.

Verney said ‘Yes’ listlessly, and added after a moment: ‘It’s beastly weather.’

She understood from the weary tone a general and comprehensive anathematization of weather, place, circumstances, and, generally speaking, life as it was lived, and replied to all of it with:

‘It will be better before long.’

He replied very sombrely, staring into the fire:

‘I don’t suppose it will.’

She wondered if more was coming, and if she ought to let it come; but her judgment was not

so taxed. He said no more, but stood for a minute or two in silence, then seemed to pull himself together, and left her.

'Poor, dear boy!' observed Miss Prendergast. 'He seems, if possible, a stage lower in spirits than Francis.' She frowned a little as she ticked off the items on her fingers. 'Meyrick—Francis—fever—is it enough? Upon my word, he really seems to mind very much indeed! Well, I'm inclined to think the possible other ingredients are none of my business. But—well, something's got to happen before long, that's very certain.'

With some irritation Miss Prendergast rang the bell for lights.

She wondered a little, the next day, whether it ameliorated the position at Abbots Verney that the Colonel had got a chill during that wet afternoon walk, and had to stay in his room. This had happened rather often lately; his friend, not admitting it to herself, knew sadly that he was breaking up gradually, like a weathered ship in her last cruise. She could have blamed Meyrick, she could have blamed Verney, for their roughening of the waters of that last cruise. Together the younger generations had a little hastened the end. Miss Prendergast, watching her oldest friend's slow collapse, was for a while wholly on his side, saying bitterly, as Rosamund Ilbert had said, that the young should have spared the old.

In the strange grey silence of these days, Verney, watching his grandfather, was mastered slowly by an immense compassion. It was as if a subtle bond was being forged between Meyrick's father and Meyrick's son, linking them to the same dreary destiny, forcing them together in the process. The son shifted his standpoint a little, looking at that destiny as it had been working

itself out through the years, with the father's eyes. He had had before sufficient comprehension to know it a very bitter thing ; he saw it now, day by day, a little more vividly, in all its weary sadness. He lost sight a little, in seeing this, of his own position in the matter ; it occurred to him that he had hitherto had his own position rather too obtrusively in view. What had been to him a matter of course became in the retrospect selfishness. It was—he had not forgotten that phrase—the business of the young to make life possible to the old. Remembering that interview, he wondered a little at the speaker's forbearance. It occurred to him that she must certainly have thought on that subject very much more than she had said. Perhaps she had not supposed herself to have the right to say more ; perhaps she had been wise in putting the case moderately, as she might have conceived him capable at the time of apprehending it ; for she did not lack discernment of the extent of the receptivity on which she had to work. He could now have taken in a good deal more. Indeed, he took it in, gathering from her the things she might have said. Her influence accentuated for him the aspect which the matter would now anyhow have increasingly worn for him ; accentuated it, no doubt, to exaggeration, for she had not seen it as he was seeing it now, but with a more detached justice and a more level comprehension, as he himself might come to see it after an interval of years.

Meanwhile, the forbearance of the unbroken silence increasingly set him wondering. It was as if a veil had been dropped between them, through which they watched each other, the younger with uneasiness growing to compassion, the elder with a fierce, unhappy scrutiny. This

reticence was in accord with Verney's own philosophy; he, if he had thought evil of a man, would have let the matter rest in silence, supposing no good to be got from speech. None the less it surprised him in his grandfather, whose philosophy it was not, but who would ever see to the bottom of a thing, threshing it out.

And he had not let the matter rest; that was made manifest with every turn of speech, every glance of his eyes. He was ceaselessly brooding, probing, accusing. Yet it seemed, as the weeks passed, that his looks grew less condemnatory, a little kinder. He said even less than at first; when Verney sat with him in his room he made little response to his talking, and would dismiss him after a time with a gruff 'Leave me alone now.' But an occasional chuckle or friendly comment surprised, perhaps, both of them. It would be followed possibly by a look which referred, not so obscurely but that Verney could read it, to the workings of self-interest, which beyond doubt prompted these endeavours, not unsuccessful, to make life a pleasant thing. Verney did read it. It stung him; then, considering it, he recognised it as inevitable. It was, in its basis, merely a reference to Meyrick Ruth's agreeable expediency; that agreeableness was among the portions of his own inheritance, and it was not given to Francis Ruth to disentangle that ironically mixed heritage. Verney inferred himself damned beyond all hope, knowing of old the tenacity of his grandfather's hold on impressions. He could only suppose that he was too bad a job for accusation or reclaim, and had been tacitly given up. He made the best of that renunciation; it fell in well with his own desire for a quiet life.

So the stormy autumn days blustered by. The fells took on the bleak desolation of winter ; the bare trees creaked under falls of early snow, which again was whirled away by the four howling winds which ragged through that autumn round about Abbots Verney. The Colonel never went out in these days. Miss Prendergast came to see him rather often, and would come home out of temper and hard to please. Her nephew always knew when she had been visiting Colonel Ruth. His manner to her took on a new shade of unobtrusive gentleness.

‘How is Verney getting along?’ he inquired once. ‘Is he feeling any brighter? How’s his temper?’

His aunt tightened her lips impatiently.

‘Verney’s all right,’ she said. ‘Verney’s a boy ; he’s got all his life before him. It doesn’t matter particularly to Verney that he’s got himself and his affair into a mess ; he’s got time enough to get over it. Oh, he’s not out of it yet, if that’s what you mean ; they’re still on atrocious terms, though I will say for Verney that he seems to be doing his best. But why didn’t he do it before? Oh, I blame them both, but I blame Verney most, because he’s young enough not to have been stupid ; besides, he wasn’t made so. It was all obstinacy on his side. Francis couldn’t have understood, even if he had tried. He never will understand now. But I tell him things, and I think he thinks them over.’ She added after a moment, sadly : ‘He’s ill, you know ; he’s most deplorably ill. It’s no use not admitting that. If Verney wasn’t trying to behave nicely to him I’d box the boy’s ears. But he is ; I will say that for Verney. The disagreeableness now is all on Francis’s side. And he

thinks, of course, that Verney's behaviour to him all has a motive. And Verney knows he thinks it. That's how they stand.'

'Poor old Verney,' said Harry Pattinson.

She sighed a little.

'Poor Francis!' and added, 'Well, I suppose one may a little pity both of them.'

CHAPTER XXVI

THE COLONEL'S DISCERNMENT

THE return of Donald Ruth, towards the end of November, seemed to bring to Abbots Verney a certain flavour of open air and level good sense, of which it might be conceived to stand in need.

Captain Ruth had been away for nine months. He had last seen his father just after the arrival of the letter in which his wife had announced the presence of Meyrick at Rome. He had heard much at that time of his nephew's disobedience and duplicity, listening with a nod that did little more than show that he heard, but perhaps also sought a little to ameliorate and condone. His passivity had not modified his father's anger; rather it had heightened it.

To the Colonel's 'The fellow has been practically lying to me these two months!' he gave a tranquil shrug. 'No use for Verney to make a fuss. If he couldn't get rid of Meyrick, best plan to say nothing about him.'

'The best plan!' his father had bitterly reiterated. 'You call it, I suppose, the conduct of an honourable man.'

Captain Ruth, sucking at his pipe, had neither admitted nor denied the charge. He had a fine power of being placidly non-committal.

Since then, he had been kept informed by letter

of the progress of the situation. 'Verney seems to have made rather an ass of himself,' was his judicial verdict.

He came home now actuated by a desire to discover how things were.

'If there's a fuss going on, I had better stop it,' he concluded. 'Poor things, fusses; don't do anyone any good.'

So he came to Abbots Verney on his arrival in England, and placidly took stock of the situation.

'You all look rather ill,' he commented, after a dispassionate observation of his nephew, and a more concerned scrutiny of his father. His wife's fragile emaciation was always a source of fresh wonder to him, when he saw her again after absence. He himself, indeed, sea-browned and massive, with straight, steady eyes and quiet, deliberate movements, was the only markedly wholesome-looking occupant of the house at that time.

'What's the matter?' he said to Verney, after his grave contemplation. 'Not recovered yet?'

'Oh, I'm all right.'

'And what's the matter with him?'

He jerked his pipe at the ceiling.

'Well, I'm afraid he's not very well.'

'Had a lot to worry him,' the Captain muttered, not knowing that he spoke aloud, and looking at his nephew with absent, pondering eyes.

'Why,' he inquired, after a long time, suddenly, 'didn't you come home before?'

Verney, under the unexpected directness of the question, coloured a little. He leaned forward and knocked the ashes from his pipe before answering.

Then, 'I don't know,' he said.

'Oh.' Captain Ruth nodded, still gravely regarding him. After another long pause, he said, 'Pity you didn't,' and there the subject rested between them.

This was on the second day. The evening before Captain Ruth had spent listening to his father's elaboration of what had already been detailed to him in letters. The Colonel expounded the whole matter with a reiteration charged with bitterness, and a touch of the querulousness of failing strength.

Captain Ruth listened silently, and smoked. He was a good listener, attentive, though not fertile in comment or the pronouncement of opinion. He had the air of reserving his judgment. He moved his position from time to time, as if in quiet, uneasy protest against over-vehemence. The little action had on the Colonel a sobering effect.

The relation came to an end. Colonel Ruth leaned his head heavily on his hand and fell into silence. His son smoked steadily. After a time he said indistinctly from behind his pipe:

'Deuced rough position for Verney.'

His father looked up at him.

'Now, you mean?'

'All along,' said Captain Ruth. 'From the time Meyrick joined him in Rome. It was a deuced rough position for him.'

'His course was clear,' said the Colonel. 'He should have had nothing to do with Meyrick. I had forbidden him. He knew what Meyrick was; he should have had nothing to do with him.'

'Not very easy to get rid of Meyrick,' observed Captain Ruth, 'specially if he was your father, I

should think. Can't well chuck him out into the streets, particularly if he's got nothing to live on, which he probably hadn't.'

'He could have had if he'd chosen to obey my orders. They both knew that. But they didn't want to obey. They wanted to play the fool together.'

'Awkward,' Captain Ruth repeated—he was a person tenacious of his ideas—'one's father coming down on one like that. Not quite like anyone else, you know. One can't well chuck him out.'

'Don't defend him, Donald. I won't have him defended.' The Colonel's voice shook a little. 'And he never let me know, till he was found out. He behaved like a coward. He—he should have let me know. He let me find out from Agnes; it was cowardly and dishonest. All those letters—and not a mention of Meyrick from first to last.'

'Pity,' observed Captain Ruth. 'Wanted to avoid a row, I suppose. Foolish; he didn't avoid a row; made it worse. Might have known.'

The Colonel seemed to be revolving it in his mind.

'I suppose you're right,' he muttered. 'It was a hard position for him. He—he was fond of Meyrick, too.' He turned to his son a little wistfully. 'You think it was hard for him, then?'

Donald nodded. He saved words where he could.

'I suppose it was,' the Colonel said, as if musing. 'I suppose it was. Well'—he pulled himself together to renewed anger—'those months, you know, that they spent together—I've told you how they spent them—played the deuce with

their money and their time—you can't excuse that.'

'All Meyrick,' said Captain Ruth. 'I don't excuse it; but it was all Meyrick. Led Verney round on a string. Always leads boys round on a string; always did.'

'You think Verney was a mere weak young fool?' The Colonel seemed for a moment to meditate over this. 'Let himself be led against his will, you think, into extravagance—and into dishonesty.'

'I dare say he didn't particularly object to spending his money—boys don't, as a rule. As to the other thing, he had nothing to do with it.'

The Colonel glanced up quickly.

'Have you asked him?'

'No,' said Captain Ruth. 'Have you?'

The Colonel shook his head.

'I've asked him nothing. I've mentioned nothing to him. I've kept putting it off. Some day I must have the whole thing out with him.' He looked at the prospect distastefully.

'I think,' said his son, 'I should go on putting it off. No good having rows. As for asking him things of that sort—about the cards, I mean—well, it's a pity to make people cut up rough. And where's the use? There's nothing to find out, beyond what we know.'

'We know nothing,' said the Colonel roughly.

'Yes, we do,' Donald said imperturbably. 'We know what the point of view of ordinary men is about that. Verney's always seemed to me quite an ordinary sort of fellow. Well, there you are.'

'He's Meyrick's son;,' the Colonel brought a concentrated bitterness to the words.

Donald nodded. 'Quite an ordinary sort of fellow,' he repeated placidly.

'But,' the Colonel muttered, 'he knew all about Meyrick long ago—and it made no difference to him.'

'No business of his,' explained Verney's uncle. 'Don't suppose he's specially particular about other people. But he's been brought up like anybody else; there are limits, you know. Ordinary people draw the line there. Verney draws it.' He ruminated over it for a little. 'Deuced awkward for Verney, when that happened. Rough luck on him. Awkward mess.'

'He must have been prepared for it,' the Colonel said bitterly. 'It can't have surprised him much, whether he knew about it already or not. He knew what Meyrick was capable of; and knowing that, he went on with him, making no difference. I can't understand it; I can't understand him. Either a man's a good sort or a bad sort——'

'Not always,' interpolated Donald.

"And if he's a bad sort, decent fellows should steer clear of him, father or brother or whatever he is. There's no making black white. Don't attempt it, Donald; I won't have it. No fellow of decent, gentlemanly, honourable feeling would have behaved as Verney did.' It was one of the sudden tempests of rage that swept over him from time to time. Captain Ruth nodded soothingly. 'Awkward for him, you know,' he repeated. 'But there's not much harm in Verney.'

'And then,' pursued the Colonel more quietly, 'he refused to apologize; refused to obey me and come home; he didn't care a damn for my wishes or my orders.'

'He made a fool of himself,' observed Captain Ruth succinctly. 'Pity. But he came at last.'

'At last he was forced to come creeping home, because he couldn't get on without funds; that's the way of it. Thought he'd better behave decently to me for a change; he showed his sense there, of course. He's enough Meyrick's son for that.'

Captain Ruth puffed in silence for a minute or two. Then, 'He's not like Meyrick, you know,' he observed.

The Colonel looked up at him sharply. It was as if desire contended in him, wistfully, with the force of old belief.

'No,' his son repeated. 'He's not like Meyrick. Meyrick wouldn't have bungled his affairs like this. Meyrick would have made it up and come home six months ago.'

The Colonel, bitterly retrospective, owned truth in this. 'You think the boy's different—hey?' He seemed to turn from the bitterness of retrospect to possibilities of brighter elements in the present case.

'Worse temper,' grunted Captain Ruth. 'Less sense.'

The Colonel seemed to take it in, doubtfully.

'You think so,' he said, as if Verney had been credited with some virtue.

'Sure of it,' said Donald. 'More conceit, too. Doesn't like climbing down. But he did climb down. Don't think it was the money—not chiefly. He could have got along all right without it. Meyrick told me he had sent him some; and the fellowship was due at the New Year. He could have got along somehow. But I suppose it occurred to him that he'd better stop being an ass. So he did. Taken down a bit by fever, too, of course; dare say that helped. But creditable to him, on the whole.'

The Colonel, leaning his head on his hand, turned it over silently. It had an aspect of pathos, not likely to strike either father or son, this straining through the mists of old creeds to see the thing fairly.

He looked up slowly.

‘You think there isn’t much harm in Verney—hey?’ he said, as if thinking it out. ‘You think, if it wasn’t for Meyrick getting hold of him, he’d keep straight?’

Captain Ruth nodded. Then he removed the pipe from his mouth, and said with deliberation:

‘He’ll keep straight, you know, whether Meyrick gets hold of him or not.’

Not all the Colonel’s straining could reach that. He shook his head, doubtfully denying.

‘Even Charlie——’ he began sadly.

‘Quite so,’ said his son; ‘Verney’s not Charlie.’

He relapsed into silence stolidly.

This was a new proposition to the Colonel; it needed consideration. To his mind hitherto the chief difference between Charlie and Verney had been that the one was Donald’s son, the other Meyrick’s. He had always watched, with unquestioning distaste, Verney taking, more and more as his capacities and qualities developed, after Meyrick, in manifest contrast to his three cousins, who showed from an early age the wholesome Ruth dulness in matters not appertaining to sport. It had been a reproduction, to him, of the development of his two sons. He quite failed to grasp this stolidly decisive ‘Verney’s not Charlie.’

Captain Ruth got up.

‘I suppose it’s time you went to bed,’ he observed; ‘mustn’t overdo it, you know.’

His quiet eyes held a grave concern in their

scrutiny; his father's manifest weakness had taken him badly by surprise.

'Shall I send Jackson? Good-night.'

He paused for a moment at the door, looking back at the grey, bowed figure by the fire.

'You must take care of yourself, you know,' he said.

There followed another pause, during which he carefully refilled his pipe. This operation over, he looked gravely at his father for a moment, weighing the pipe in his hand meditatively.

'He's quite a good fellow, you know, Verney,' he observed, and turned and went heavily downstairs, leaving the Colonel to cogitate over that last utterance.

It seemed that that conversation started Colonel Ruth on a new phase. He had in future the air, with Verney, of turning over, of being ready to take in. He took it in more and more, with characteristic progress; he was one who, having found his tack, adhered to it with sure persistency. The tack, indicated to him by his son, was taken by him the more readily that he had himself hovered doubtfully about it before.

'Led Verney round on a string,' Donald had said. The Colonel, because he had half held it already, had assimilated the view, letting altogether pass the other statements, such as 'He'll keep straight whether Meyrick gets hold of him or not,' which he would never arrive at, and which held for him no meaning. He seemed now, by his doubting, questioning eyes, to be perpetually repeating 'You think there's not much harm in Verney—hey?' and weighing the suggestion cautiously.

'Verney's not like Meyrick' was to him a stumbling-block. Verney, he knew, was like

Meyrick ; his very voice, his smile, countless knacks of manner and turns of speech were like. He was undoubtedly like : like enough not to have been disgusted by Meyrick ; like enough to have been led by Meyrick ; like enough to have taken Meyrick's side against his grandfather's. But not like enough, perhaps, for anything further than that. Not like enough, the Colonel was newly beginning to hope, to have been intentionally dishonest, or, possibly, to be actuated now merely by self-interest.

Discernment with the Colonel could no further go. It was as much as could have been hoped from him. Verney, in becoming a weak young fool, attained in his grandfather's mind the highest eminence of which he was capable therein. He reached that eminence with a steady progress. The Colonel's manner softened towards him. There was even in it at times a kind of indulgence, touched perhaps with compassion ; at times a contemptuous sorrow took its place. It was hard, the Colonel admitted, to be Meyrick's son ; as hard possibly, in a way, as to be Meyrick's father. Thus the two compassionated each other, silently, unexpressively, and Meyrick's brother, looking on, thought, 'Deuced awkward position. But he's coming round a bit.'

With the snows of early December Colonel Ruth renounced his tenaciously held assumption that he was a man in health. Giving up the futile pretension, he retired into illness. He seemed to lie without hope and without dread, relaxing his grip on life day by day. None of those about him had any doubt as to the end of it arriving before long.

'I feel a beast,' Mrs. Ruth wrote to her

brother; 'but all the same, there are things one would like to know. The poor old fellow's keeping us quite in the dark, and it's inconvenient.'

Verney supposed the business would end in silence as far as he was concerned. The quarrel seemed now of singularly small import; it might well be left to die and be forgotten in peace, submerged in the greater issues of life and death. It was, surely, a thing infinitely remote from this still sick room, filled with the white light of the snow. Yet something in the tired, hollow, brooding eyes seemed to say that forgetfulness was not yet. The Ruths did not easily forget. Even at the point of death they would still cling to a dominating idea. You would still read it in the eyes of a Ruth lying dead—the memory of something fought for and not relinquished except with life.

With the white light of the snow in the room, Colonel Ruth spoke at last to his grandson. Verney, coming in obedience to that summons, knew that the thing was not to die in silence after all. He was sorry, because he did not wish the stillness of the sinking life to be shaken and stirred. He stood at the foot of the bed and waited.

'I have meant to speak to you,' Colonel Ruth said presently, 'but I have not done it—not till now. I have waited. I must tell you now that I have been watching you, trying to decide about you.' He paused long; he spoke with difficulty. 'Perhaps I've been hard on you, Verney; perhaps I haven't made allowances enough,—all your life.'

Verney, colouring, warded this off with a mutter of the lips.

'I am sorry,' the Colonel carried it on. He would have his say. 'I believe I have been a little hard on you, and I'm sorry for that. You see—there was Meyrick—you're so like in some ways; I thought in all. I think now'—he said it slowly—'that I have been mistaken. I do not think you are, altogether, like Meyrick.'

He paused on the pronouncement.

'It makes no odds now,' Verney muttered, shamefaced.

The Colonel heeded him not.

'That business in Rome,' he went on slowly; 'I have been—very much displeased with you about it. I think,' he added, 'that I have perhaps been a little unjust. I think, perhaps, you couldn't well help yourself. Your position wasn't easy.'

'I'm awfully sorry,' Verney said abruptly. Such an apology his grandfather had waited for for nine months. But he amplified it—qualified it, rather; even now he must have the thing clear between them. 'I mean,' he said, 'I'm sorry I was such an ass about it, specially afterwards. But I couldn't promise even now not to be with him'—he fought oddly shy of the mention of his father—'if he wanted me to be. After all, one must, you see.' He felt the position must be defined, even now, the arguing instinct rising.

The Colonel's eyes were on his face, sadly.

'I know,' he said, with a surprising sober gentleness, 'I know.'

The position lay, thus asserted, between them, just as it had lain from the first; as it had lain on that July evening of blazing gold, when they had walked home in silence, this wall suddenly risen up between them. The wall still stood; but it

was as if it had assumed a new transparency, so that they could see each other through it. And the elder saw the younger with a curious distortion, as he was not. Clinging to the verdict that 'Verney was quite a good fellow,' the Colonel could only see him in one way. His grandson was pitifully wrong; if he was a good fellow, then he was weak—unstable as water. If he was not weak, then he was not a good fellow, but one to whom right and wrong were as empty names. The Colonel had thought it all out, lying in this still room.

He told Verney so.

'I have thought it over,' he said, 'a great deal. You're a good lad, Verney, on the whole; I believe you mean to be a good lad. Don't think I don't believe that of you. But I'm afraid you can't hold out against anyone who tries to get hold of you. Not enough grit in you—not enough ballast. You and Charlie—you're both like that. Meyrick has gone near to ruining both of you. I'm not blaming you. Meyrick always had influence—always could—could lead boys round on a string. That's how it is. And I know, as you say, that it would be the same again. He would make you do whatever he chose. I suppose,' he said sadly, 'that he will.'

'It's not a question of making,' Verney explained, shamed and half resentful. 'It's my own show. I do nothing I don't choose.'

'Don't shield him,' the Colonel broke out, a little flame flaring out at last through the stillness. 'That's not your business. I don't want your explanations; I understand all about it for myself. I say it's his doing; I say he leads you round on a string; I say you're only a weak young fool. Well?'

'Haven't we talked about it enough?' said Verney, alarmed at the flame, which he knew must not be. 'It makes no odds, does it?'

The Colonel sank again into exhaustion.

'Yes,' he said wearily; 'it does—to me. I don't want, you see, to think my grandson a scoundrel, as well as my son. I don't know,' he added, after a moment, 'if you were concerned in that card business or not——' He paused a second. Verney made no sign; his face was very impassive; that his grandfather should not know that stung him so deeply, that words were pitifully irrelevant. 'But if you were,' said Colonel Ruth, 'I am certain it was because your father forced you into it. I don't think you would do a thing like that for yourself.' It was, to him, a declaration of confidence—the utmost limit of discerning trust, stretched even to the point of a generous excess. Such a declaration he had never come near to before. It amounted to a recantation. His searching eyes saw no change in the impassive face at the foot of the bed. If he had hoped for words, none came. He sighed a little, and took up his speech again, wearily. 'So you see, Verney, I can't quite trust you, though you're a good lad when you're let alone. But that isn't enough. You won't be let alone. I might of course stipulate—in my will, I mean—that your father was to keep clear of you, but I couldn't make sure. And anyhow there might be others—one can't tell. I'm afraid, Verney, that anyone could get hold of you. And I don't want the money squandered and the place neglected. Meyrick would sell everything on it, if he got the chance. So—I'm not going to leave it to you, Verney, but to Donald, and Donald's boys after him.'

Verney said, 'All right. I didn't suppose, you

know, that you'd leave it to me. Of course if my father is out of it, I ought to be out of it too.'

'I've brought you up,' said the Colonel, 'to think you were going to have it. That would have been the right arrangement; you're the elder line. I wish it could have been so. But—you understand it can't, don't you?'

'Yes,' said Verney stolidly. 'I don't want it, you know.'

'Roger,' mused the Colonel, 'is a steady fellow—a good fellow. He'll look after the place well.' He seemed to send his spirit on into the future, dreamily. Then he brought it back abruptly.

'You'll have to work, Verney,' he said; 'you'll have to work hard, and make your own way. You'll have some money, but not enough to keep you without work. Your uncle will pay you the money in the form of an allowance; and it will be a conditional allowance, you understand. Conditional on your making a good use of your money and your time. Do you follow me?'

Verney nodded inexpressively.

'Your father, too, is to have an allowance; that will also be conditional. One of the conditions will be that he lets you alone. I do not think he will wish to forfeit his allowance by breaking that condition. I have tried to safeguard you, you see, Verney. I have done my best. The rest must remain with you.' He paused, and breathed heavily.

'Keep straight, my boy. Live a decent life. There—I can't talk any more.'

'No,' Verney said. 'Don't. I think I had better go now.'

He turned from the bed quietly, and left the room.

Colonel Ruth lay, very tired, in the white light.

'He's a good boy,' he muttered, after a minute or two; 'he made no fuss. Perhaps—perhaps he's got a little of the Ruth stuff in him after all.'

CHAPTER XXVII

THE LOSERS

MEYRICK RUTH stepped out of the snow-lit darkness into the dim light of the hall. His brother met him at the entrance.

‘You got my wire? Well—how is he?’

‘He died yesterday afternoon,’ said Captain Ruth unemotionally.

His brother started a little. He had not expected it. But he, like Donald, preserved a phlegmatic practicality. The Ruth custom of betraying no emotion served occasionally as a screen for the lack of it. Not that Meyrick would purposely use such screens; he had too keen a sense of humour, and too astute a discernment, for such pretences. As a matter of fact, he was really more than a little shocked. The emotional side of his nature was not much developed, but it was touched now. He had always had a certain affection and respect for his father—the one dating from early days, when he had been idolized and denied nothing, the other increasing in depth through the years of stern inflexibility that had brought him short against a will as strong as his own. Moral rectitude left him unstirred; but a strong persistence of aim—though he deplored it—he acknowledged to be a good business asset. This same strong obstinacy he admired, with a shrug, in his brother; with a certain amusement,

touched with uneasiness, he had noted it also in his son. In his opinion, a man, though he should doubtless know his own purposes, should also know the exact psychological moment when it behoved him to modify, and if necessary abandon, those purposes. He deplored the lack of this latter knowledge in the members of his family. It made of them stupid people. Even Verney, in some respects not at all a stupid fellow, was a fool in this matter. Meyrick was feeling a little irritation against Verney. He appeared to have managed his affairs so extremely badly. The irritation was not lessened by the consciousness that what he termed the awkward mess was largely his own doing. Not by any means entirely, though; he had left Verney in a position in which he could perfectly easily, if he had chosen, have made up the quarrel, tendered his submission, and been received back into favour. But the boy had lost his temper—a ridiculous thing to do—and played the fool. What the consequences of that folly were to be, Meyrick speculated a little uneasily. He still, however, hoped for the best.

‘I’m too late,’ he said soberly to Donald. ‘I’m sorry.’ There the subject dropped between them. Neither had anything to say on it.

‘Who are here?’ Meyrick inquired. ‘All the boys?’

‘All but Roger. Agnes, too, you know. No one else.’

Humphrey and Charlie and Verney were sitting in the dining-room. Humphrey, his ruddy face wearing an air of sober dejection, leaned his elbows on his knees and stared into the fire. He had loved his grandfather. Charlie, looking on the whole gloomier, lay back in his chair, and

had the air, vaguely, of thinking it would be a solace to smoke, but of not being sure whether it would be suitable to the circumstances, though Verney, he remarked with a furtive envy, seemed to find the question simple of solution. Charlie was an affectionate youth, and did not wish to do an unsuitable or irreverent thing. He had never been on particularly easy terms with his grandfather, his feelings towards him had always been largely tinged with nervousness; perhaps his mercurial spirits suffered more from the depression of the household than from any deep feeling of loss. But he was pathetically dejected.

Verney smoked a pipe, and did abstruse sums on the back of an envelope. He had always done sums when he was in low spirits. He had done a great many during this autumn and winter. Of the three, he looked distinctly the least moved.

Meyrick came in and found them thus.

Humphrey shook himself up, and said a blunt 'How do you do?' unsmiling. He did not care about what he had heard of his Uncle Meyrick. Being a straightforward, unimpressionable sort of young man, he did not easily fall under the spell of exterior attractiveness. He perhaps inherited his grandfather's curt view that a man was either a good sort or a bad sort, and if he was a bad sort, decent fellows should steer clear of him. Meyrick's eyes noted his rising colour with a twinkle.

Charlie brightened visibly as he shook hands. His uncle Meyrick was a sporting old sort, who kept things going. Charlie was pleased to see him.

Meyrick looked past him, towards his son.

'Well, old fellow?'

They shook hands; Meyrick's other hand lay

for a moment on Verney's shoulder. Verney's eyes shifted, looking aside: they did not meet Meyrick's. This same trick they had now with most of the world. Miss Prendergast had deplored it, divining its significance to the Colonel.

'You don't look up to much,' Meyrick said quietly. 'Not recovered yet—what?'

'Oh, I'm quite all right now, thanks.'

'Badly ill, weren't you?'

'Oh, not particularly badly, you know. But it pulls one down rather.'

'I should say it did. What possessed you to spend your summer in Rome, my good boy?'

A little pent-up irritation moved the question. It had been a folly quite beyond Meyrick's comprehension, and he felt moved to rub it in. People had no business to be fools.

'Oh, I don't know. It's healthy enough, you know, really. Lots of people do it.'

'H'm.'

Meyrick shrugged his shoulders and turned away. It was characteristic of him that he made no reference to the occasion of their assemblage there. Sentiment bored him, and he was singularly free from cant in his relations with people. He took his father's death with an apparent phlegm equal to his brother Donald's. Donald, however, had certain lines about the lips, and a hint of careworn sadness in the eyes, which were absent from Meyrick's handsome, shrewd face.

Donald Ruth took his father's death hard. He had loved his father with a deep, expressionless, quiet affection from the childish days, when he had stood a little in the shade behind his brilliant, idolized brother, yet even then insensibly the more trusted and looked-to of the two; through boyhood and youth, when he had, acting so often

as mediator and go-between, learnt to mingle his affection with a little pity for the blows and disillusionments so bitterly felt; and increasingly through manhood, when he had come to know himself the one stay and support, and had acquired a new protective gentleness towards the proud, broken man, the depth of whose hurt none knew but himself and perhaps one other. He had grown, through the years of disgrace and scandal, to dislike his brother. He was a simple and direct person, and when he did not like a man he threw no disguise over the fact. He admitted no reason why, because a cad happened to be nearly related to him, he should feel, or pretend to feel, any less dislike of him and his doings. Persons of a less baldly unsentimental mould perhaps cherish, through many strains and vicissitudes, some ragged remnant of an old childish affection. To have played in the nursery together covers a multitude of sins. But Captain Ruth was not in any degree a person of sentiment. The past for him held no glamour; he was a stolidly practical man of action. He was, in fact, a Ruth. And he objected to his brother.

He objected also, in some degree, to the position in which his father had left him. He did not mind inheriting the property; he considered, indeed, that it was the best arrangement under the circumstances. But he felt that his position as guardian—for it came to that—of his brother and nephew savoured a little of the absurd. He was to undertake the position of moral judge of his nephew's actions, and withhold payment from him when he thought fit. It entailed a responsibility for which he did not care. It was against all his principles to keep a man in leading-strings. If Verney wished to go to the deuce—though

Captain Ruth had seen no symptoms in him as yet of any such desire—then he would go to the deuce, money or no money.

As to Meyrick, it did not strike Donald as of being of much importance whether he associated with Verney or not. Verney, in his uncle's eyes, was quite capable of looking after himself.

His father's instructions, however, had been laid upon him, and had to be carried out. Being a straightforward person in his dealings, he acquainted his brother with the terms of the will that night as they sat together in the library.

Meyrick nodded, cut the end off a cigar, and said, 'Let's see it.'

Donald fetched it from his father's desk and handed it to him.

Meyrick ran his eye over it and laid it aside. He was rapid at getting at the gist of the matter.

'So,' he observed meditatively, 'there we stand.' 'Yes.'

Donald regarded him gravely. He advanced no comments, no conventional expressions of regret, no pronouncement of personal opinion on the equity of the matter. It was not his way, nor did he imagine that anything of that nature would in the least interest Meyrick. Nor was he concerned to defend himself from the possible charge of having attained these results by the use of personal influence. What Meyrick thought of him did not greatly affect him.

Meyrick did not charge him with that either in words or in thoughts. He had too keen an insight and knowledge of men for that. To his credit be it said that he would have felt no anger had he believed it to be so. It would have accorded with his own code, and he was not an inconsistent person.

He stared into the fire reflecting, and repeated :
'So there we stand.'

It was not an unexpected blow to him. He had known long since that he had lost his own game. But he had pinned his hopes on Verney. However pressing his needs, he would not have gone near Verney last winter in Rome had he suspected the end to be so near. He acknowledged himself to have been stupid in the matter. But it was, finally, Verney who had lost the game. It was Verney who had thrown away his opportunities of reconciliation and submission all through the spring and summer, and had finally brought matters to this pass. Why could not the boy have been pleasant—shown a little tact? He felt against Verney the impatient irritation that stupidity—and only stupidity—always stirred in him.

So this was the end of it, and he had better have spared his pains, and not have made friends with his son at all. That enterprise of his had signally failed of its end, he admitted, with almost a laugh at his own expense. Well, the boy and he were not likely to get much good of each other in the future. He, if he wished for the substantial bequest left him by his father, would have to leave Verney severely alone. He regretted it less than he would have regretted it a year ago. The climax of their companionship in Rome had been of a singular infelicity. He was not certain that, after all, they were made to pull together. It was not merely that disastrous climax of which he was thinking. He remembered, looking back, that there had been in their relations before that, growingly, a certain strain. . . . Verney was in some ways so unadaptable. It is an uncomfortable thing to live with a man

whom you have badly shocked, and whom you may shock again, and who lets you know it by turning unpleasantly sulky. Verney was such a pleasant fellow when he chose, too; it was a pity. Sociable, too, and lavish with his money, and knew how to amuse himself. Nothing straitlaced about Verney—except at times, when things went a little too far for him. But having once gone too far, Meyrick divined that they could not easily be replaced on the old footing. Better, perhaps, to leave one another alone.

‘Pity, though,’ he muttered.

Then he roused himself, and cast a half-humorous regard at his brother’s part in the business.

‘So you’re to take care of both of us. I’m afraid you’ll have your hands full—what?’

‘I suppose you’ll wish to take the money?’ Captain Ruth said.

Meyrick looked up in surprise. The proposition seemed self-evident.

‘Well—naturally.’

‘Rather, I mean, than to be with Verney?’ Donald amplified. He liked to have his situations well defined.

‘Why, yes.’ Meyrick thoughtfully flicked the ash from his cigar. ‘Verney and I, I think, must contrive to get on without one another. Better for the boy, too—what? At least, so I’ve always been given to understand.’

‘Quite so,’ said Captain Ruth.

‘Poor old Verney,’ Meyrick commented, after a minute. ‘Hard on him, you know. Quite his own fault, but rather hard on him—what?’

‘Distinctly so,’ Captain Ruth said; ‘very hard lines indeed. But the other arrangement wouldn’t have worked.’

It was the most expansive utterance to which he had yet committed himself.

Meyrick looked at him whimsically.

'No? I should have come down on him, you mean? Well, it is conceivable, of course. And you think that wouldn't have done?'

The jerk of the Captain's head might be taken to signify assent.

'Well, well. It should, you know, have been mine. Why don't they entail these places? Pity to run business matters on sentimental lines. But you don't think so—naturally. That's all right. Do you think those boys would play bridge? Not quite yet, perhaps—no. Well, I think I shall go and find Verney. If we're threatened with permanent separation, we must make the most of our time.'

He spent the rest of the evening making himself pleasant to his son and nephews—rather too pleasant, thought Humphrey, who was in no mood to be entertained. But Charlie was wonderfully cheered up by the time he went to bed.

Verney and his father sat up late together

Directly they were alone, Meyrick said:

'You know about the will?'

Verney, mixing himself a whisky and soda, said he did.

'A poor business, isn't it,' Meyrick commented. 'But it can't be helped now. You were rather a fool, though, to let it come to that. What possessed you to sulk in that way all the summer? I should have given you credit for more brains. You simply flung the whole thing away. Never lose your temper, my good boy. It's a fatal mistake. I suppose you think it's my fault, this mess; so it is, partly, and I'm sorry. But it was

chiefly yours, you know; really it was chiefly yours. Well, well; there's nothing to be said, I suppose; the thing's done now. We both get, I believe, something to live on. Only we have to deserve it first, which is a bore. That means we shall have to steer clear of each other for the most part, I'm afraid.'

Verney, glancing at him quickly as he gazed ruminatively into the fire, read his tranquil acceptance of the situation. It suddenly, indescribably stung him; not the acceptance, but the manner of it. For he was acute enough to divine the touch of relief. It was, possibly, inevitable, that relief; yet it stung him. It seemed, in that moment, as if he had paid rather a large price for his father's friendship, and in the end found it rather coolly withdrawn. He had a curious feeling of having fallen, somehow, between two stools. He had been fond of his father; he had been fond of his grandfather; he found himself, somehow, rejected of both.

'It's a pity,' Meyrick said. 'I'm sorry. It's hardly a fair—well, well.' He remembered, what he was always forgetting, that he was in a house of death; also that Verney had been fond of his grandfather. 'But we must make the best of it,' he resumed. 'Oh, we shall see each other sometimes, of course.'

'I suppose so,' said Verney.

'And you? What shall you do?' Meyrick asked, turning towards him.

There was a genuine concern in his keen eyes. Things were going hardly with the boy.

'I?' Verney put down his glass a little wearily. 'Oh, I'm due in Rome, you know, for two more years. Then—oh, I don't quite know. I shall pick up a job of sorts, I suppose.'

Meyrick watched him. He looked listless and bored.

'Rough luck on you,' Meyrick said, with some gentleness. 'I'm sorry.'

'Oh, don't mind me. I shall be all right. I shall get along first-class.'

Verney smoked stolidly.

Meyrick Ruth was not a person of strong feeling, but a curious sense of loss came over him suddenly, as he lay back and watched his son through the cloud of tobacco-smoke.

He had been very fond of Verney. The boy was a good fellow—a nice, companionable fellow. He was like his mother; less good-looking, but he had her brows and eyes and mouth. He was always reminding Meyrick of Margaret Denzil as he had first known her. He was like, too, in other ways; the Denzil strain in him was stronger than the Ruth. He remembered a day, very many years ago, when it had dawned upon him—half humorously, yet a little bitterly too—that he had disgusted Margaret. She had taken it with a stubbornness that was like Verney's own. Verney, during the night and grey dawn that had been their last in Rome together, had called his mother forcibly to Meyrick's memory. . . .

He wished for a moment that he and the boy were not to be thrust apart like this. It was not fair; it was bad luck. And yet. . . .

Still that vague feeling of relief made itself felt.

Verney pulled himself to his feet, yawning a little.

'Let's go to bed,' he said.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE TABLELAND OF COMPENSATIONS

VERNEY left England before the end of the year. It came upon him suddenly that he wanted to be in Rome. One may hate Rome while one is in her; to Verney she had been latterly as the abomination of desolation; he recalled her inimical and glaring hideousness still in nightmares. But inevitably, irresistibly, her chains were round him, to draw him back. The personal glamour of a city is beyond explanation, and beyond resistance—and no more to be reasoned away than any other glamour of personality.

Miss Prendergast, when Verney went to see her, saw the spell holding him in its grip. He might talk of his work, but it was not work that called him so imperiously; it was, as she knew, Rome; as she knew well, having felt those chains herself.

‘And what now?’ she had asked of him, softly and rather sadly. Something had broken in her when Francis Ruth died. She looked old, and dwindled, and very gentle.

‘Oh, now’—he had looked past her, out into the white, bright world without, and she had understood the far-looking eyes, and knew his answer before he gave it—‘oh, now I shall go back to Rome.’

‘Of course you will,’ she had said softly. ‘I’m

too old, and too poor a thing, or I, too, would go back to Rome. I'm her slave, too, Verney—but a slave in exile. I envy you your closer bondage.'

'How I've hated her, though,' Verney had murmured, his chin in his hands, recollectively smiling a little.

'She hasn't been entirely kind to you,' Miss Prendergast had said.

'If you ever want to know a person's faults, quite pitilessly, and to loathe him for them,' Verney had told her, 'I advise you to paint his portrait on a postcard, and as he looks in very hot weather. And for somebody—his mother, say—who tells you you must make him handsome or she will not buy it from you. Yet it's something to know the worst. I've no revelations to fear from Rome now. I cherish no illusions.'

'But still you want her,' his friend had said.

'I suppose,' he had answered her, 'that one doesn't want to be anywhere else. At all events,' he had added, 'there's my business.'

She had said another thing before they had parted.

'And sometime, Verney, you will abandon your principles, and bring a wife home?'

He had shaken his head.

'That sort of thing, you know, isn't much in my line. I shouldn't really care about it,' he explained, 'even if I thought I should at the time. There's plenty to do,' he added, 'without that.'

If she had hoped for a confidence she was disappointed. But what he said after a moment came nearer to one.

'I should make an awful mess, you know, of any venture of that sort. It's more in Humphrey's line. I've rather a habit, I'm afraid, of making a mess of things,' he added.

The thoughtful, half-puzzled statement was to her infinitely dreary, though it was not intended to hold pathos, and hardly bitterness. It was, perhaps, the remembrance of the confident, self-depending Verney of a year ago which so stirred her by the sharpness of the contrast. It would not then have occurred to him to say that he was apt to make a mess of things; with justice he might have asserted that he had so far made a fair success of them.

'At your age,' she said softly, and her eyes were suddenly wet, 'one would hardly say that. You've too many "things" before you to say that. You've all your life, Verney——'

'Yes,' he assented, a little absently, playing listlessly with the black cat that pressed against his foot. 'Yes. It seems a good long time, certainly.'

'Long enough,' she said, 'to make an immense success of very many things.'

'Yes,' he said soberly; and added, 'There's one line I shan't try again, anyhow—the picture post-card trade. Whatever else I succeed in, I made a 'most unholy mess of that. If Hummel's got any of them still in stock—and I don't think the "poblic" can have bought them all up yet—I'll buy some and write to you on them, shall I. You would like them; there is something really very nice and bright about them.'

With that they had parted.

To Meyrick, who came later to see her, she had said suddenly, 'Your boy, Meyrick, is horribly fond of you. Did you know?'

Meyrick had looked a little troubled.

'I believe he really is,' he had said. 'He's a good boy—I'm fond of him too, you know.'

'And he was fond of his grandfather,' she added,

half to herself. 'And he seems to have fallen, somehow, between the two. And who else he has been fond of I cannot say; but I should imagine, perhaps, that that too is an affection (if it exists beyond my fancy) which has let him through.'

'Poor old Verney,' said Meyrick meditatively.

'But—there remains Rome,' Miss Prendergast said. 'I don't think Rome will fail him. Though it failed him in the summer——'

'Yes. Let him through with a vengeance. What?'

'Why, yes.' Miss Pendergast sighed. 'Like all the others I'm afraid it did.'

'Poor old Verney,' Meyrick Ruth said again, and a real concern softened his shrewd, amused eyes. 'He hasn't had much luck, to tell the truth. What?'

Verney called on the Denhams in London. He was aware that he must swallow the morbid pride and shame which had caused him to shun his Roman acquaintances. He had realized, with a rather bitter smile, that one must get used to things. The Denhams might serve to break him in a little for his meeting with his other Roman friends. He did not intend to live a sociable life in Rome; that had been for always spoiled for him; but one must come across people, and it was no good being a fool about it.

So he went to see the Denhams. Johnny was making glass; in the intervals of this employment, Maggie and he still played in their workshop. They were still enthusiastic; but to neither of them was their work any more a vocation. The sober cynicism of age—Maggie had recently turned twenty, and was feeling it—had tempered their zeal. About Johnny there was a certain

atmosphere of pleasant satisfaction with life; it was as if he had ceased to live foolishly hard, and to take himself, his talents, and his emotions in grim, youthful earnest. A certain flame of living in him seemed to have gone out, leaving a pleasant glow, more equable and satisfactory.

Verney, though he was young and occupied with himself, took in a little of this, and read it in the light of the conversation he had with Maggie before her brother appeared.

'Johnny's engaged, d'you know,' Maggie said, hugging one knee, in the old confidential, companionable way.

'No? Is he? Good man;' Verney's brows rose a little in involuntary surprise.

'Yes,' Maggie nodded. 'She's a friend of Rosamund Ilbert's; a school friend. She's awfully fond of Rosamund. But,' she added, after a moment, 'she's not a bit like her.'

'No, of course. Why should she be, you know?'

'Oh, I don't know. Only Johnny, you know, was really rather fond of Rosamund—he liked her awfully. P'raps he'd be cross if he heard me say so—only I don't know why he should mind. We're all of us fond of Rosamund, I suppose. No one could help it. It's funny, isn't it?'

'Very funny.'

'Some people are like that, I suppose. Molly isn't like that a bit. But she's awfully nice, and pretty, and a good sort. I'm very fond of her. And so is Johnny,' she added naively.

'That seems just as well, under the circumstances.'

'And, do you know,' went on Maggie, who liked to think things out, 'in a way it seems to be a more comfortable sort of way of caring for

people, just gently, you know—no, not that exactly, because he's quite in love, really—but it seems to me more comfortable not to be in love so frightfully badly as people are with Rosamund sometimes. I've seen them. It makes them quite miserable.' Maggie loyally imagined she was making no apparent reference to her brother. 'And,' she added, 'I think it must be nicer in a way to have the person you're fond of more or less to yourself, instead of all kinds of other people liking her frightfully too. Rosamund, it always seems to me, has such crowds of friends, who talk to her about all kinds of intimate things that I sometimes feel as if she couldn't have much special, particular store left for one person. But, you know, I believe that's nonsense really; because she's one of those people who have such a large store to start with—of sympathy, you know, and that sort of thing—that however much of it she gives away to people, she will always have lots left. So I dare say really it would be all right.'

'I shouldn't wonder,' Verney said.

'You know'—Maggie laughed a little—'it was really quite Rosamund's arrangement this. She wrote and told the Lacys—Molly's people—to call on us directly we came to London. I believe she asked them to take us up and be kind to us. Anyhow, they were. Molly and Johnny made friends on the strength, more or less, of both being fond of Rosamund, and I'm certain Rosamund knew they would. And now Rosamund's tremendously pleased. I believe she thought it would be the very thing for both of them, because Molly, somehow, is the sort of person who ought to marry; the sort of person who's much happiest married, I think. There are some, you

know. And it's cheered Johnny up no end. But it was exactly like Rosamund, wasn't it ?

They both smiled a little.

'Exactly,' Verney admitted.

There was a little pause. Both were reflecting.

'I'm not sure that I should dare,' said Maggie slowly, 'to arrange things for people as much as she does. It would seem, somehow, such a tremendous thing. . . . But with Rosamund—well, it isn't a question of daring ; it's simply that she can't help it. She can't help being tremendously interested, and caring, and the funny thing is—no, it's not funny either, because she understands things so—that she always seems to be right.'

'I believe she does,' Verney said soberly.

'She's a splendid person to be friends with,' concluded Maggie, with a quick burst of enthusiasm, 'because, however much one isn't her greatest friend, or even one of her greatest friends, you always know that she cares such a very great deal what becomes of you—when she has time to remember you at all, that is,' she added, laughing a little.

The addition showed a certain acuteness of insight. Verney looked at her whimsically.

'And one should, of course, be thankful for small mercies,' he said.

'They aren't small.' Maggie knitted her brows, thinking it out. 'One gets such a lot from her, you see.'

'I see,' he said gravely. 'One must try, then, to be grateful for what one gets, and not be like Oliver Twist.'

He was wording for her her meaning—not, or not at least confidently, his own. For his own was not very clear to him. He arrived at it a little more on the way to Rome. Life seemed to

resolve itself, on his way through the flat lands of France, into the doctrine of the second best—the *pis-aller*, Rosamund Ilbert had called it. The evolution of the principle was slow and confused, but it seemed to be born at last out of the things of his life—the things of which he had, as he had said, made a mess.

So, on the last day of the year, he came again to Rome. Seeing her from far off, he felt no longer an exile. He forgot his lost heritage; forgot, in seeing her, how Abbots Verney had looked to him a few days since, when he had turned back at the foot of the hill, and looked up to where it stood against the sky full of snow, dominating the bleak world of white fells. He would go there no more in the years to be, but as a guest. Here in Rome he was no guest. Rome was for everyone; not, perhaps, with a great intimacy of belonging, but with a wide receptiveness, and a most manifold, compelling charm. He would take that of her, and be content. . . . Swiftly the analogy rose; but for the moment he shunned it, not as yet knowing his purposes.

These were illumined to him forcibly later in the day. For in the Corso he met Rosamund Ilbert. She, characteristically, was laden to overflowing with many parcels, and she was coming out of a shop, dropping the parcels on to the street. He picked them up for her. She said first:

'Thank you tremendously. I've paid for none of them—and I don't know when I shall be able to. It's fearful how little money one has, however much one starts with. Perhaps father'd like to pay for some of them—one of them's a present for him.'

Then she glanced at him, taking in his presence there, and seemed to pause a moment, doubtfully, waiting for him to speak. She perhaps knew his circumstances; perhaps in that moment's hesitation she somehow divined them.

Looking at her in that pause, he seemed to discern in her a great friendliness, yet a friendliness behind a guard. She would hurt him with it no more. Yet he knew that it was there for him to take, if so he chose. He knew in the same moment that he could not help but choose. Whatever he might have reached at, this he must now grasp. This was made clear to him as he looked at her standing there, with the old gay friendliness held somehow in abeyance behind a guard of doubting gravity, that seemed to be sounding and divining him. She had, it was borne in upon him, withdrawn her friendship to a distance, because it had hurt him once. He might wait long now for any request that he should come and see them. He was stirred by perversity; by the desire to show himself a reasonable man; but mostly by the knowledge that he must take what he could of her, for he could not do without it. Her friendship neither she nor anyone else should take from him.

‘When may I come and see you?’ he said.

‘Will you come? How nice of you. . . . We’re at home to-morrow afternoon, you know.’

In that moment she had divined his acceptance of the situation. It was as if that delirious afternoon had slipped out of sight; it no longer lay between them.

He put her and her parcels into a carriage and left her.

He laughed at himself as he walked away, because he had joined the ‘crowds of people,’ as

Maggie had termed them, who were Rosamund's friends. The position was certainly not an unpleasant one—it might, that is, become a not unpleasant one when time and custom had a little smoothed down its jagged edges. Anyhow, pleasant or unpleasant, he had no choice in the matter. Having missed the best, one must perforce clutch at the second best, lest one should miss that too. His second best, he told himself, was better than Johnny Denham's, particularly for a man who had no desire to marry. In a world of second bests he did not come badly out of it.

So he thought, leaning over the wall of the Pincio, and looking over the roofs of Rome, to where the dome stood up against the frosty purple afternoon, with the fires of the setting sun behind it. It was the last sunset of the year.

It had been a curious, unrestful year. Verney frowned a little, thoughtfully, over the retrospect, as he lit his pipe. He had so made a mess of things; everything he had touched seemed somehow to have broken in his hands, leaving him tumbled among the fragments. He seemed to have fallen between two stools; with moral code a little too low for his grandfather, a little too high for his father, the bitterness of his heritage had been that he had failed with both. He knew that; he smiled rather painfully over the touch of relief he had divined in his father's unquestioning acceptance of the situation arranged for them. He had been fond of both his father and his grandfather; the irony of it was that he had in him too much of each to wholly please either.

Looking back, it seemed singularly inevitable.

So did all one's desires fail, and let one through. Yet one fell, not far, but on to the tableland of

the second-best. It was a world of compensations, it seemed. His grandfather, at the last, had believed him not wicked but only weak. His father, withdrawing himself quietly and as a matter of course, had said, 'But we shall see each other sometimes.' Verney believed that he would really undergo some inconvenience to do so. For his father liked him.

It was a world of compensations. He had desired love, and had accepted instead friendship.

He had lost Abbots Verney ; but Rome and the cities of the world were his—a wide heritage. The adventurer's spirit stirred in his blood as he looked down over the great sea of roofs to the purple sunset. The cries of the Piazza del Popolo came up to him as he stood.

'I should think it's good enough,' said Verney, looking down on Rome, and blowing smoke-rings towards the dome.

One did not get one's ideal in life. Most of it was a sort of *pis-aller*—making the best of things as they were. But it was a good *pis-aller*, after all.

'The world,' pronounced Verney, 'is a good old place to play round in, after all.'

The sun disappeared ; the purple evening deepened. From the churches of Rome the Ave Maria bells chimed, from dome to dome.

The new year would dawn in frosty splendour ; there was not a cloud in the keen, deep blue sky.

The shadows crept up over the city, seeming to rise from the deep, steep streets, till they touched and darkened the sea of roofs. The lights came out one by one—the flare of the lit streets, the glow of the red windows of the churches. From behind each red glow the slow chanting sounded,

wailing with soft monotony, a continuous sad undertone to the shrieking and rattling of the streets.

In the deepening sky the stars came out, one by one.

Verney went down to Rome.

EPILOGUE

How hope does not die, how youth does not accept the hard terms of the 'solid, ironical orb,' but will ever rise above them, wresting them to its needs, how, upon the old year which has seemed to end all, the new year will rise with its eternal vitality, its eternal youth of hope, its eternal, incorrigible grasping after ideals laid so wisely by; how from shattered fragments of failure life rises up, still triumphant, still indomitable—all this belongs to the new, unchronicled years. To the unchronicled years belong many things; growth is hidden in them; the fresh upspringing of waters bound long in frost; the fulfilment of the uses of good gifts, no longer squandered, no longer laid aside to rust, but reaching forth in rich achievement through the years; the growth, too, of the delicate flame of friendship, till it flickers at last, strangely, to new fires; then the melting by these fires of all frost, new waters unimagined set flowing, everywhere new growth. For growth does not cease. It boots little to look on to the end: suffice it that to leave people with their feet set upon the road is to leave them in a good place—and we have been told that to travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive.

These travellers may well then be left upon the road.

And let this be the parting word ; for, seeing that it is with temperament rather than with circumstance that the chronicler of lives is mainly concerned, the chances of circumstance may well be left behind the dim veil of the years to be. For they are, after all, but chances, these events and actualities of life ; that which remains stable throughout the shifting scenes, and develops, each according to its powers and its limitations, is character, sublimely regardless of the vicissitudes of the actual.

THE END

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